

The breeding birds of Kelling Heath 2007

As with last year this year has been one of mixed fortunes with some disappointments but also some exciting developments. To say the weather could have been better is surely an under-statement.

Tree Pipit. A singing male on territory on 9th and 10th June with a female joining him from 11th to 17th but after then I saw neither of them again. Another pair seen during the same period some distance away also disappeared. With lack of evidence to the contrary I shall assume no breeding this year.

Stonechat. One pair first seen on 22nd Jan., 2 pairs on 6th March and 3 pairs on 25th March. The female of one pair did not remain and the male stayed alone all summer, as did another male in a different area. On 7th May a pair was seen with 3 fledglings and a week later the other pair was seen feeding 2 young. Both pairs were seen with 2 fledglings each from second broods during August. Good results from a typical heath land species.

Woodlark. Oh dear - not so good!. I saw 3 in song flight on 29th Jan. and 3 on 20th Feb. Then nothing significant happened until 16th March when Noel Elms saw a pair with nesting material. He located the nest site and for the next few weeks he and I kept an eye on the nest which could be seen to contain 3 young (needless to say we watched from a good distance). On 21st April we visited the nest and Noel ringed the 3 young birds. A second brood of 5 in a nest 100 yards away from the previous nest was ringed on 21st June. Apart from a pair seen carrying food and behaving as if they had young in a different area we saw no other evidence of breeding. Some management work will be undertaken this winter to provide improved habitat for this species.

Nightjar. 3 heard churring on 17th May - 1 week earlier than last year - and 2 churring whilst 2 other males were in flight on 22nd May. On 15th June and again on 8th July I heard 5 or 6 churring at the same time and as in previous yearly reports I can only say that this could be the basis for an estimate of the number of pairs which eventually bred. Thanks to a local bumblebee enthusiast following a bee across a patch of heather a nightjar nest containing 2 eggs was found in mid-June. The location of this nest was revealed to no more than half a dozen people. On 14th July Noel Elms and I visited the nest at 6pm and the 2 young were ringed. I was thrilled to see the female leave the nest, as we approached it, and perform her "damaged wings" distraction display as she flew away, just touching the tops of the heather and certainly convincing me that she was injured! The male flew out from nearby as she gave an alarm call but he soon dropped back into the heather and left the female to perch on an oak tree until we had left the site.

Turtle Dove. The first was seen and heard on 12th May and by 31st May 3 were singing from different localities. On a few occasions a pair was seen in flight but I saw no positive signs of nesting or any young birds as proof of breeding.

Dartford Warbler. Since I first started visiting the heath 9 years ago, and more especially since the first one ever recorded (to my knowledge) was seen in May 2003, I have been hoping this species would breed here. Well - it's happened and not just one but two pairs have fledged 3 each in their first broods and 3 each in their second. When I first saw evidence of nest building I was concerned at the proximity to the footpaths and the possibility of disturbance. Having now spent many hours watching these delightful but elusive birds I believe they go about their business (as indeed they have proved) without being unduly concerned at human presence. I understand this is the first recorded breeding in Norfolk and I have been asked to write an article for the 2007 Bird and Mammal Report.

So that's the situation with the true heathland species but what of the other, more general, species? On one visit I counted 7 pairs of Linnets with fledged young. 4 pairs of Yellowhammers and 4 pairs of Chaffinches produced young as did 5 pairs of Whitethroat. Birds heard singing in spring and early summer included 3 Garden Warblers, 5 Blackcaps and several willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs. I saw no young of the first two species but a few youngsters of the other two species.

A pair of Bullfinches appeared to be nesting in Blackthorn by the car park but no young were found. 2 pairs of Skylarks took advantage of grass which had been cut last winter and both pairs were seen carrying food. Dunnocks, Wrens, Goldcrests and tit species appeared to be present in reasonable numbers and hopefully produced a few youngsters.

A pair of Green Woodpeckers nested in a large Silver Birch and 3 young were fledged. One of the youngsters was seen several times clinging to a concrete fence post by the railway. Perhaps it was wondering which species of tree has a square trunk!

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