

The breeding birds of Kelling Heath 2008

This is the fourth annual breeding report I have written and having re-read the previous three I realise I have no idea what constitutes a 'normal' breeding season for the heath. Each year is different but maybe this makes it more interesting.

Stonechat. Up to 5 seen during the winter with 2 pairs from 15th January joined by a third pair during March. On 20th May I located a nest site and Noel Elms found the nest and ringed 5 nestlings. On 11th June I saw 4 of these youngsters fully fledged. I found a second pair with 2 fledglings on 13th June and a third pair with 2 fledglings on 20th June. I saw this third pair with a further 3 fledglings in early August and in September Paul Adams found a pair with 3 newly fledged young. A good season for this species but I have not re-found any of the ringed birds yet.

Woodlark. If last year was disappointing, with only one pair known to have bred, this year has been worse. 2 males were in song on 28th Feb. Thereafter up to 5 birds were seen, possibly 2 pairs plus a lone male, but they were determined not to show us if, and where, they were nesting. Noel Elms, Paul Adams and I spent a lot of time watching for clues but when we located birds they flew a long way off, in different directions each time. We concluded that they may have bred, not on the heath but on adjacent land. An adult and a juvenile were seen drinking from a puddle on the heath on 14th June. If they have failed to breed on the heath I hope it is nothing more than a lack of suitable habitat as I believe we can rectify that situation with prudent management.

Tree Pipit. A pair was seen by the level crossing on 11th June and the male could be found in that area for a further 2 weeks. I have no idea if or where they bred but let us hope they succeeded.

Dartford Warbler. After the excitement of last year's breeding with 2 pairs producing 12 young I had visions of myself dashing around the heath with a calculator to ensure I didn't lose count this year. Well I didn't lose count as only 1 pair bred, producing 2 young in their first brood and definitely 1, possibly 2, in their second. On 19th Jan I saw 3 pairs with each male singing and displaying during the next few weeks. There was also a lone female and possibly a lone male at the same time. On 9th Feb. a Great Grey Shrike was found on the heath and although it fed mostly on insects and lizards during some periods of unseasonal warmth it is known to have killed at least 1 Dartford during colder weather. It stayed for 10 weeks (9 weeks too long in my opinion!) and if it returns next winter it will be shot! I hope the number of Dartfords next year will be augmented by a few new arrivals.

Turtle Dove. First seen and heard on 24th April and eventually there were 3 pairs. On 24th June a pair with 2 juveniles was seen in trees near the car park and this was my only proof of breeding this year.

Nightjar. A good year for the species and for me - I believe the number

of breeding pairs increased and I had some of my best and closest views ever. I first heard churring on 10th May from 3 males, 2 of which I saw together in flight. On 9th June I heard 5 males north of the road and later met birders who reported 2 churring by the railway. From this and subsequent evidence I would not be surprised at 7 or 8 breeding pairs but I cannot prove this. On 9 separate occasions I heard brief daytime churring from different parts of the heath and I wonder is this indicative of territory.

This year the most numerous breeding species has been Linnet with maybe 12 to 15 pairs, most of which were seen with young on territories well spread out across the heath. The plumage of some of the adult males was absolutely stunning. Yellowhammers also did well with 5 pairs seen carrying food. I estimate a similar number of breeding Whitethroats. I saw 2 pairs of Blackcaps with young but I suspect 2 or 3 more pairs also bred. Based on 4 males holding territory I would like to believe the number of Garden Warblers is on the increase but proof of breeding is hard to find. Even Bullfinches, brightly coloured though they be, are not easy to monitor and that is a pity because 2 pairs were seen in late spring.

Only 1 pair of Skylarks nested, to my knowledge, and I saw the parents with 2 fledglings. Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs were abundant in late spring and based on regular sightings throughout the summer I should think several pairs of each bred, as did Blue Tits, Coal Tits, Great Tits and Long-tailed Tits. The hedgerows beside the road and on the western boundary held several pairs of Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Lesser Whitethroat. A few Wrens and Dunnocks and one or two Meadow Pipits were seen during the breeding season but at the risk of losing my job I admit to having no idea how many pairs bred!

John Wagstaff