

Sixteen Years and Counting, The Birds of Dowles Brook

Michael Harrison



Dowles Brook

Rosemary Winnall

The kingfisher had brought a fish to feed its young in the well-concealed hole in the sandy bank on the edge of Dowles Brook. Its task completed, it emerged to fly to a nearby branch slung low above the water and began to preen. Kingfishers' nests leave a lot to be desired in the way of cleanliness and preening is a common occurrence after feeding. As I watched, a resplendent male bullfinch flew down to the same branch, settled a metre or so away from the kingfisher and also began to preen. Both birds were mirrored perfectly in the still water of the pool immediately below them. They lingered with their toilet for a full five minutes before flying away. I had a passing thought; if I hadn't grabbed that opportunity given to me shortly after I had retired seventeen years ago, I might never have been privileged to see what I had just seen.

I have birdwatched for most of my life, including in more recent years some short-term species protection work [how I love calling it 'work'] for the RSPB; peregrines, little terns and red kites in Wales and latterly golden eagle wardening in the Lake District. It had long been my ambition however, with retirement in mind, to really get to know an area thoroughly, to have my own 'patch' as it were. My chance came in 1990 when the British Trust for Ornithology [BTO] was looking for volunteers for its Waterways Bird Survey [WBS]. I put my name forward and was offered Dowles Brook in Wyre Forest. I was delighted.

The WBS has been in operation since 1974, initially as an offshoot of the BTO's Common Birds Census [CBC] and is designed to study

riparian i.e. riverside, birds under-represented by the parent scheme. Some, like the dipper, hardly ever appeared on CBC plots at all. A mapping process is employed along the linear routes of rivers, canals and other waterways. It lays down certain guidelines. Volunteers choose their own stretch of water which must be at least 3K long. I chose as my plot the stretch of river forming part of the boundary between Worcestershire and Shropshire, which runs from the bridge upstream of the Experimental Pond [these days neither experimental nor a pond] downstream to the junction with the Severn, a distance of 4.5K and a drop of 13 metres from one end to the other. I would be required to make nine or ten visits during the breeding season [early March to late June/early July], each starting before 9 am and timed to give as even a spread of visits as possible. The full list of bird species to be surveyed is actually quite short - only thirty five in fact, of which twelve occur on Dowles Brook - seven breed [mandarin, mallard, moorhen, kingfisher, grey and pied wagtail and dipper] and the rest are visitors, some frequent and some less so [mute swan, goosander, greylag goose, Canada goose and grey heron].

For an observer Dowles can have its problems. It is lined almost along its full length by trees and bushes so that, as the season advances, previously clear sightlines are gradually obscured by burgeoning foliage and the light levels dim noticeably. Here the birds have the advantage; they usually see you before you see them. A pathway is some help as it runs alongside the river but long stretches are without a path and

this means a scramble over rocks and through bushes and trees, a bit of a roller-coaster with the ever-present brambles to add to the fun.

Each new season reveals a new river, erosion has taken away a bank, trees have fallen blocking the way, the river-bed itself has subtly changed as shingle beds shift, grow or melt away and it all seems slightly different from last year. Particularly interesting are the heaps of detritus swept down in floods and ensnared by obstructions along the river; recent research has pointed out the value of these structures for wildlife in the ecosystem.

I needed to take some preliminary steps before I began my survey. A visit to the local library unearthed a map of the right BTO scale and a visit to the occupiers of the riverside land allowed me to present my credentials and explain what I was doing. The survey began in 1991 and, apart from a foot and mouth-enforced interruption in 2001, has continued up to last summer [2006]. I introduced a second survey in 2002 but more of that later.

What is a typical survey day like? It starts early. I arrive as soon after dawn as possible and follow a set route noting on my map all the information I need for my report. I use a BTO notation system, which allows me to record for each bird or group of birds:

- 1 the species - each species has a two-letter identification code - KF [kingfisher], GL [grey wagtail], DI [dipper] and so on,
- 2 the sex/age - male, female or juvenile,
- 3 the number of birds - pairs, groups, family parties,
- 4 behaviour - singing, courtship or mating, gathering nesting material, carrying food, having a spat with a neighbour or intruder, and so on.

Understandably, the notations can't record everything and cryptic notes appear on the page from time to time to help in later analysis. A visit can last as much as five hours, especially when something unusual, puzzling or important has occurred. Later, back at home, I extract the information on to separate maps for each species, so building up a pattern for the whole season, one visit at a time. My final job at the end of the season is to delineate where possible the breeding territories for each species and eventually to send off the whole lot to BTO HQ at Thetford in Norfolk, where it is analysed along with ninety or so

similar reports from up and down the country ending ultimately in a published summary.



Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*)

Steve Robinson

The four important breeding species are mallard, kingfisher, grey wagtail and dipper. Dippers are largely holding their own, between three and five territories each year, varying in size quite markedly, an indication of the relative abundance of a suitable food supply in any particular part of the river. Interestingly, a map I came across recently shows dipper breeding density in the 1970s much as it is today, which is encouraging. Dippers have exacting requirements when it comes to nest sites and show remarkable site fidelity to a favoured location. They usually nest in crevices in rock-faces or in tangled tree-roots, though occasionally selecting man-made structures, underbridges, on walls, with singularly less success than on more traditional sites. All the nests I have found have been located over running water. One nest site has been occupied each year since I began and probably for many years before that, while another was used only once, was flooded out by rising water and has not been visited since. An inexperienced pair once built on the side of a wall in the open air; the nest falling off once it had reached a critical size. Dippers' nests are relatively easy to find. They begin building early in the season and are often at it when I arrive at the beginning of March. Both birds take part, seeking out moss in the first stages and adding grasses and leaves, especially oak, as the nest nears completion. Much of the

material is soaked thoroughly before being built into the nest, possibly to make it more malleable. Nest-building can take weeks; I found a pair busily building in early March and they were still at it in late April after an apparent lengthy pause in between, almost as if they had lost interest. Dippers waste no time at the nest when feeding young, a couple of seconds and they are away again. One bird habitually dropped vertically into the water below the nest when leaving and swam across to the opposite bank before flying off [I recorded this behaviour over ten years ago and I have never seen it repeated since]. The fledglings can be very noisy in attracting their parents both in the nest and later out on the river but they do not stay long in parental company. Ten days or so and they are away on their own, wandering between territories

and misleading the poor observer trying to determine whether a pair has bred successfully or not on a particular territory. Young dippers are duller in plumage than the adult with pale underparts, whose smudgy patterns can vary from one bird to another, making it possible to identify juveniles individually.

A pair or two of kingfishers breed every year. Their nest sites are limited to stretches where they can find the vertical sandy cliff-faces, unobstructed by foliage, that they need. With the most dazzling plumage of any British bird, kingfishers are nonetheless very difficult to pick out when perched motionless in the shade of overhanging branches. Their plumage needs light for its effect and the birds merge into the leafy background in shadow. They are very wary of humans and so



Grey Wagtail

Steve Robinson

often the only view is of a swiftly departing bird, its whistling call seemingly mocking the viewer. I used the flight call frequently as the only available means of plotting the bird's movements up and downstream, never seeing my quarry at all. With young in the nest, kingfishers are easier to observe. As mentioned already, they habitually wash or preen after feeding young, often leaving with a shallow dive into the water and away. Once a bird dived twice in this fashion, flicking across the water like a jewelled stone in a children's game. One nest was the subject of high drama. It had rained heavily and the floodwater had undercut the bank, taking away the whole front of the nest-hole as the cliff-face collapsed into the river. Somehow, the birds had excavated a new hole diagonally up into the nest from a crevice just above the waterline and were busily feeding the young when I arrived the following day. As far as I know, they fledged successfully.

Grey wagtails tend to drift away during the winter but gradually come back in March and early April. They are elegant birds with their over-long tails, constantly on the move and bounding flight. Between five and seven pairs nest regularly on Dowles each year, probably a maximum for this stretch of the river. The males advertise their presence with a simple song, hardly more than a variation on call-notes but sweetly pitched and characteristic. Some field guides describe the song as 'infrequent' but I hear it regularly, even into July. Young greys leave the nest with short tails, which lengthen gradually in the weeks following. I have used this feature to distinguish one family party from another, when they feed in close proximity to each other later in the season.

The mallard is an abundant species on most WBS sites but on Dowles it is seen mainly in pairs or small groups with males the commonest. Pairs seem to be well-established by early March and there is little evidence of the harrying of females frequently seen on more open waters. Mallards are not easy to census. In their male-chauvinist world, where the males have little contact with the females after egg-laying and territories as such do not exist, a BTO- devised formula is employed to determine populations. The number of males is recorded on each visit

from March to May and the second-highest day total from this is regarded as the measure of breeding females; perhaps rough and ready but probably accurate enough. Females can be seen, some times as early as April, trailing their coat-tails of tiny ducklings but these often fall victim to predators and not many reach maturity. Aberrant males with traces of domestic blood turn up now and then and are separately recorded. Mandarins also occur. This Chinese escape is now more firmly established in the wild in Britain than in its native land. One pair has been around along Dowles in most years but has always disappeared before breeding could be proved. This year [2006] two pairs were on the river, one of which raised a brood [when last seen] of four young.

Now to the second survey referred to above. The old CBC was replaced some time ago by a new Breeding Bird Survey [BBS] and it soon became apparent that the existing WBS and the new BBS were not readily compatible. The BTO therefore set up a new Waterways Breeding Bird Survey [WBBS] - are you still with me? - adapted from the BBS. The WBBS came into effect in 1998 although I didn't adopt it on Dowles until 2002. The WBBS scheme requires only TWO visits per season, one early [for me, mid-April] and the other late [early June] when ALL species are counted. This survey has brought into prominence the rich diversity of birdlife in Wyre Forest, particularly on Dowles Brook. There can't be many woodland sites in the UK where 45 species can be seen in a single morning but on Dowles I have recorded 43, 44 or 45 every year since 2002. Taking into account the fact that some species turn up some years and not others and adding in those seen on WBS visits but not recorded as they are outside the WBS remit, the grand total of all species is 62.

Now, after sixteen years, I'm calling a halt and the mantle will be taken on by someone else. My inevitably 'snapshot' view of Dowles has been a huge experience and I shall be in Wyre probably just as much even though my counting days are over. My wife Jill, who has shared so many experiences with me already in Wyre, will share in the new adventures as well.

REFERENCES

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