

THIRTY SEVEN YEARS OF COMMON BIRD CENSUS
at
THE OLD RACECOURSE NEAR OSWESTRY
1964 – 2000
by
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MONITORING THE BREEDING BIRDS ON THE OLD RACECOURSE COMMON USING
COMMON BIRDS CENSUS TECHNIQUES OF THE BRITISH TRUST FOR ORNITHOLOGY

Introduction to the Common Birds Census (CBC)

The CBC was an annual survey made during the breeding season to monitor changes in the populations of common British birds. It was organised by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). The census was started in 1961 at the request of the Nature conservancy as a means of studying the impact of agricultural changes in the countryside on birdlife through increasing usage of chemicals, hedgerow removal and land drainage etc. It was also a useful way of assessing other factors that affect our birds such as hard winter mortality and drought conditions in the wintering grounds of summer migrants etc. To begin with it was requested that attention should be paid to farmland as this was where the main changes were likely to occur but as time went on other habitats were allowed into the CBC.

My involvement – the beginning

In 1962 together with Peter Start I started to make visits to four local areas close to Oswestry. Our aim was to do a bird census of each area but unconnected with any national organisation. We even obtained 25” to the mile O.S. maps of the four areas through our local library. However we soon found that the commitment to cover four sites had been too ambitious and by the time we had visited each place just once the season had advanced so much that we were not going to get the continuity we wanted.

I had joined the BTO by this time and read about the CBC so it was a natural progression to contact them for details of what the CBC involved. Out of the four areas that I had maps for I chose the Old Racecourse as I have always been fond of hill country and as this was common land so there would be no problem regarding access. It was also quite rich in birdlife which included birds such as whinchat. By the time I had corresponded with the BTO and my offer was accepted it was 1964. I made my first visit on April 16th of that year.

Methodology.

As the CBC was a national survey a set method of field work was necessary throughout the country and observers were sent instructions from the BTO on how the census was to be carried out. By 1964 the method of plotting the position of birds on maps at the 25 inches to the mile scale had been adopted. The census was done during the main breeding season which is April through to June or July when most species are tied to territory because of the proximity of a nest site. One of the main activities during this time is the singing male as he is the one which is actually holding the territory around his chosen nest site. Early in the season the male will be singing to attract a female, later he should be singing to defend that territory against other males of his species. This activity can be accurately plotted on the large scale of the map, similarly other signs of breeding such as a pair of birds together, the carrying of nest material and carrying food for young.. Other signs of territory such as two males fighting are indicative of a nest site nearby.

Each species had a symbol that could be entered on the map. B = blackbird. R = robin. WR = wren. BT = blue tit and so on. Each activity required an additional entry on the map. A singing male blackbird has a circle around the B. A blackbird carrying nest material = B mat or carrying food for

young = B food. Two male blackbirds holding adjacent territories and singing against each other = B-
-----B with circles around the Bs.

The area being surveyed was to be visited regularly perhaps as often as once a week with visits varied between morning and evening as some species are more active at different periods of the day. Each visit was given a letter. The first visit of the season started with A, the second with B and so on. These were entered on the visit map together with the date, time of start and end of the visit and the weather conditions. At the end of the season all the activities of each species was transferred from the visit maps onto species maps. From the information transferred from the visit maps onto a species map a cluster of symbols emerged that indicated each territory. The size of each territory will vary from species to species and is also dependant on the density of each population. One of the most abundant species on the Old Racecourse in spring and summer is willow warbler. The number of territories has increased considerably since 1964 resulting in smaller territories. This dense situation also means that there is more song as each male defends his patch from many neighbours. When all the symbols had been transferred from the visit maps to the species maps an assessment could be made of the status and number of territories of each species. All the maps were then sent to the BTO Census unit for checking. It was here where the final analysis was made and the information added to the nationwide assessment of the status of each species. This assessment was then used as a tool for the conservation of those species whose numbers were in decline and a useful check on others.

Habitat.

The Old Racecourse covers some 60 acres and is situated on top of a hill at a height of 311 metres approximately 2.5 miles west of Oswestry. Once the site of Oswestry races it is now a popular place for walking and picnicking by visitors. The ground in 1964 was heathland of bracken and gorse with scrub. There are a number of dwellings with gardens particularly on the west edge of the south part of the common while on the east edge there are small areas of deciduous woodland. There is a conifer forest on the southwest corner. Two small farms with hay fields and pasture complete the picture. Over the years there has been an increase in the scrub and the site has changed from heath to young woodland especially on the south part of the common.

Some points regarding the census on the Old Racecourse.

The time of the year that I carried out the census was end March to mid July. I observed the common and some of the surrounding fields and woodland that could easily be covered from the common. I made a visit each week when I could and the length of time varied from 1 hour in early spring to 2.5 hours when the summer migrants were present.

The final figures for the number of territories were decided by the BTO at their headquarters and their interpretation of my maps at times varied with mine especially with abundant species such as willow warbler. So the number of territories of this species may be fewer than the figure given. Another factor affecting this species could be that of migrants moving through and singing as they passed by. A colleague once asked me "how do you know if your figures are accurate?" to which I replied "that if I applied the same degree of accuracy or inaccuracy each year then I would see patterns emerging". One thing is for sure that when species are no longer present then they are lost and when other species move in they show themselves either by sight or sound.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES OCCURRING ON THE OLD RACECOURSE DURING THE COMMON BIRD CENSUS. END MARCH TO MID JULY 1964 – 2000.

Grey heron: *Ardea cinerea*.

Seen flying over occasionally. Has landed in field with pond by North Common.

Canada goose: *Branta Canadensis*.

A pair have occasionally attempted to breed on the pool in the field by the north common but without success.

Mallard: *Anas platyrhynchos*.

A regular breeding species on or close to the Old Racecourse particularly by the wet field by the north common.

Sparrowhawk: *Accipiter nisus*.
Occasionally seen flying over.

Buzzard: *Buteo buteo*,
Vary scarce in early years of the CBC. Started to appear in 1970s and has become an annual territory holder since 1997.

Kestrel: *Falco tinnunculus*.
A regular visitor or territory holder since 1967.

Grey partridge: *Perdix perdix*.
A regular territory holder in 1960s and 1970s. Became scarce in 1980s and last occurred as a visitor in 1989.

Pheasant: *Phasianus colchicus*.
There were two or three males holding territories in most years since 1988. Prior to this year one was more likely or classed as a visitor.

Moorhen: *Gallinula chloropus*.
Since 1991 there has been one territory every year at the pool in the field by the North Common. In the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a territory for a few years.

Coot: *Fulica atra*.
Since 1995 there has been one territory on the same pool as the moorhen.

Lapwing: *Vanellus vanellus*.
Occurring in some years as a visitor in the 1960s and early 1970s, since 1975 there has been one territory in the fields near the north common, except for 2000 when it was absent.

Snipe: *Galinago gallinago*.
Present as a visitor in 1969, there was a male holding territory by the north common from 1975 to 1979.

Woodcock: *Scolopax rusticola*.
Present in the bracken and usually flushed by accident in the early mornings, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Just recorded as a visitor each time.

Curlew: *Numenius arquata*.
Since 1969 has been present nearly every year. It is particularly fond of the fields near the north common. Since 1990 there has been one territory every year.

Black-headed gull: *Larus ridibundus*.
A visitor to the area. Very irregular.

Stock dove: *Columbus oenas*.
Present in trees nearby since 1970s. One or two territories mapped regularly.

Wood pigeon: *Columbus palumbus*.
Originally not included in the CBC because of its habit of nesting later in the year making this census unrepresentative for monitoring the breeding population of this bird. However with nesting becoming earlier in more recent years probably associated milder winters this species is now included. I first included it on my CBC in 1984. Numbers of territories range from two to ten.

Collared dove: *Streptopelia decaocto*.

This species only colonised Britain in 1955 so it was still reasonably rare in 1964 when the CBC began. I first recorded it in 1975 with one territory. The population has increased to two and occasionally three territories.

Turtle dove: *Streptopelia turtur*.

A decreasing summer migrant. Recorded as a visitor in 1966, 1974 and 1980. No records since.

Cuckoo: *Cuculus canorus*.

Last recorded as a territory holder in 1985. Occasionally heard since. See table.

Barn owl: *Tyto alba*.

Recorded once only as a visitor in 1969.

Little owl: *Athene noctua*.

Recorded only once as a visitor in 1989.

Tawny owl: *Strix aluco*.

As with other nocturnal species CBC visits are wrongly timed for recording them. It did hold territory in 1972 and was recorded as a visitor three times in the 1980s and twice in the 1990s.

Swift: *Apus apus*.

Hunts for insects over the Old Racecourse during the summer but does not nest in the census area.

Green woodpecker: *Picus viridis*.

An Irregular species in 1960s and 1970s has occurred more regularly since, usually as a visitor but held one territory in 1997.

Great spotted woodpecker: *Dendrocopus major*.

An irregular visitor until the 1980s since then it has occurred as a visitor every year. Often enough to qualify as a territory holder in 1994, 1997, 1999 and 2000.

Skylark: *Alauda arvensis*.

Five territories in 1964 dwindling to just a visitor by 1975 and absent except for an occasional visit by 1983. See table.

Swallow: *Hirundo rustica*.

Numbers of territories vary from one to three. Always associated with farms adjoining the Old Racecourse.

House martin: *Delichon urbica*.

Occasional visitor.

Tree pipit: *Anthus trivialis*.

A summer migrant. First recorded in 1969. Numbers built up to nine pairs in 1987 but dwindled during the 1990s with no birds in 1997 and 1998. See table.

Meadow pipit: *Anthus pratensis*.

On of the regulars at the site. Has held territory every year since 1964. Numbers reached nine by 1969 but during the 1970s dropped to two or three. Like the previous species this is a ground nester and is vulnerable to disturbance. When the cuckoo was regular at this site, this was the host species. See table.

Grey wagtail: *Motacilla cinerea*.

Recorded only once. This species is more likely to spend the breeding season on the River Morda.

Pied wagtail: *Motacilla alba*.

Regularly found and often qualifying for one territory. Occasionally roosts in bracken in spring and early summer when up to 20 have been counted.

Wren: *Troglodytes troglodytes*.

Another regular since 1964. This species has an interesting history. In 1964 there was only one territory. There had been some severe winters in the early 1960s and this species is vulnerable to winters with heavy snowfall and hard frosts. By 1967 there were 10 territories and numbers fluctuated during subsequent years from 3 to 13 depending on the winters. The milder winters since the 1990s have been kind to this species. See table.

Dunnock: *Prunella modularis*.

Another regular. Appears to be decreasing in recent years. See table.

Robin: *Erithacus rubecula*.

A real success story. During the first ten years the average number of territories was six. During the last ten it was 18. See table.

Redstart: *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*.

A colourful summer migrant. This species has occurred regularly since 1981. It is fond of nesting in holes in old trees, particularly ash and in stone walls. Numbers of territories have reached three but one or two is more regular. See table.

Whinchat: *Saxicola rubetra*.

Another delightful summer migrant. During the 1960s there were between three and nine territories but sadly numbers declined, by 1982 there was just one. In 1983 there were none and the species has never returned. The bird is particularly associated with bracken. See table.

Wheatear: *Oenanthe oenanthe*.

A spring passage migrant only occasionally recorded.

Ring ouzel: *Turdus torquatus*.

My attention was drawn to a strange blackbird type song in a field to the east of the north common one spring morning in 1994. On inspecting the cause I discovered a ring ouzel. A summer migrant to British hills this one must have touched down after flying over the Shropshire plain. It has not been seen here again.

Blackbird: *Turdus merula*.

A regular every year since 1964. Numbers of territories vary from eight to fifteen. See table.

Fieldfare: *Turdus pilaris*.

One of the winter thrushes that visit Britain in large numbers. This species is present during April before departing for Scandinavia and is often seen flying westwards towards the forests and hills of Wales where it roosts.

Song thrush: *Turdus philomelos*.

Another regular. In the early 1970s the number of territories reached seven or eight but numbers only reached two or three in later years. See table.

Mistle thrush: *Turdus viscivorus*.

Although this species was just a visitor in the early years of the CBC it has been a territory holder quite regularly in more recent times. Occasionally holding as many as three territories one or two is more likely. The bird is an early spring nester if the conditions are right and with milder winters of late could well be rearing a brood by the time that the census starts. When there have been three territories this figure can include second broods. See table.

Grasshopper warbler: *Locustella naevia*.

Present from 1964 to 1976 with sometimes one territory. In 1971 there were two. This species may have been influenced by the young trees planted locally for forestry.

Lesser whitethroat: *Sylvia curruca*.

This species is a summer visitor which occurs almost annually and is particularly fond of the blackthorn hedge on the roadside of the north common where I record a singing male regularly. Despite this annual occurrence it has only qualified for a territory in 1996 and 1997.

Whitethroat: *Sylvia communis*.

This bird has an interesting story of international importance. In 1964 there were seven territories rising to nine by 1966. In 1969 the number dropped dramatically to two. The sudden decrease occurred everywhere in Britain and became the subject of intense research. The reason was pinned down to severe drought in the birds winter quarters which was the Sahel region of Africa. The absence of water meant that there were no insects or fruits to sustain this species. This episode is a good example of birds being indicators of the state of the environment. Numbers gradually dwindled and by 1983 it could only be classed as a visitor. In 1997 and 1998 there was one singing male holding territory but by the next year it was absent. See table.

Garden warbler: *Sylvia borin*.

This summer migrant likes scrub and the growth of bushes and young trees on the Old Racecourse suits it very well. There was one territory in 1970 and by the late 1980s there were six. In 1991 there were nine. Since then numbers have decreased slightly but still remain healthy. See table.

Blackcap: *Sylvia atricapilla*.

This summer migrant prefers more mature woodland than the previous species so it is not surprising that it did not appear until 1972 when I recorded one as present but not holding territory. At the time the older woodland along the eastern edge of the south common was the only likely habitat. In the 1980s it became more regular, often with one then two territories and by 2000 there were four. See table.

Wood warbler: *Phylloscopus subilatrix*.

This summer migrant prefers mature deciduous woodland and has only been recorded on occasion as a visitor. Each time it has been the woodland on the east side of the South Common that has attracted this species. The records may well be of birds passing through the area.

Chiffchaff: *Phylloscopus collybita*.

Another warbler that likes denser woodland so it is not surprising that this species did not occur much in the early years of the census. There were three records between 1964 and 1982 with only one year as a territory holder. The conifer plantation on the South West corner became more favourable as the trees grew. Since 1986 this bird has occurred every year and since 1995 has held three, four or five territories. See table.

Willow warbler: *Phylloscopus trochilus*.

This is the only summer migrant to hold territory continuously throughout the census period. The scattered scrub which was present in 1964 being ideal habitat. The numbers have increased over the years and now territory numbers are well into the thirties. A visit to the Old Racecourse in late April and May will reward the visitor with the delightful descending cadence of its song – a real spring sound. See table.

Goldcrest: *Regulus regulus*.

Britain's smallest bird and one that is much at home in conifer plantations. The conifers in the south west corner, the tall cypress trees in the hedge of the paddock and the small plantation by the crossroads are ideal. Occasionally there are one or two territories.

Spotted flycatcher: *Muscicapa striata*.

A summer migrant and one that can be easily overlooked as it has a quiet song and can be present on private ground close to the Old Racecourse and can be missed by me. I recorded one or two territories in the 1970s but during the 1980s and 1990s it has been just a visitor with one territory now and then.

Pied flycatcher: *Ficedula hypoleuca*.

Another summer migrant that prefers hillsides with sessile oak woods grazed by sheep in western Britain and Wales in particular. The common is not the ideal site but I was delighted to hear a male singing in woodland on the east side of the South Common in 1986. It occurred almost annually for 10 years but is now absent.

Long-tailed tit: *Aegithalos caudatus*.

A species that is present regularly. Usually as a visitor but has held territory. In 1983 I recorded three territories but this was exceptional.

Marsh tit: *Parus palustris*.

An occasional visitor but has held a territory once. Appears less since 1980 but see next species.

Willow tit: *Parus montanus*.

A very similar bird to the last one and was not identified as a separate species until the 1890s. Some confusion with the last species does occur. This is an occasional visitor and like the marsh tit has held a territory once. It does appear more frequently than marsh tit.

Coal tit: *Parus ater*.

An occasional visitor in the 1960s and 1970s this species became more frequent during the 1980s and started to hold territory in the area during the 1990s with one, two and in 2000 there were three territories. The increase in woodland has no doubt aided this species.

Blue tit: *Parus caeruleus*.

Although absent at the start, there has been an increasing number of territories since 1966, with up to eight at times. The provision of feeding stations in gardens is helping this species to survive in reasonable numbers. See table.

Great tit: *Parus major*.

A regular since the start of the CBC. Numbers have not been as high as the blue tit and the highest number of territories has been six but is more likely to be lower. See table.

Nuthatch: *Sitta europaea*.

It was 1989 when this species became an annual territory holder with one and occasionally two males being present. Before this it did occur irregularly mainly as a visitor but now and then as a breeding bird. See table.

Treecreeper: *Certhia familiaris*.

An occasional visitor.

Jay: *Garrulus glandarius*.

A visitor at times. It did qualify for a territory in 1983.

Magpie: *Pica pica*.

Infrequent in the 1960s this species occurred annually since 1972. At first as a visitor then increasing to two or three territories in the 1980s and 1990s.

Jackdaw: *Corvus monedula*.

An irregular visitor until 1993 when there was one territory. A colonial species. Numbers build up to seven territories in 2000.

Rook: *Corvus frugilegus*.

In 1993 a rookery was established in trees to the west of the north common and although the wood was not actually on the Old Racecourse the number of nests could be counted fairly accurately so I included the colony in the CBC. There were 32 nests in that year and the numbers remained about the same until 1999 when the rookery moved to the east of the South Common.

Carrion crow: *Corvus corone*.
Present almost every year with one or two territories.

Raven: *Corvus corax*.
Absent until 1975 when one flew over the site. It was not until 1986 when I could record this bird as a visitor again but it did occur more frequently and since 1993 has been annual with the racecourse forming part of a territory in 1996. Since then it has reverted to being just a visitor.

Starling: *Stirnis vulgaris*.
A regular species occurring every year since 1964. The nests are easily located by listening for noisy young being fed by the parents. Usually nesting in holes in trees there is one pair that nests in a hole in an electric pole. Numbers of nest holes are not high and number from one to five. There are probably nests in trees and buildings on private property nearby that I miss.

House sparrow: *Passer domesticus*.
This species was not originally included in the census. It was added in 1985 and one or two territories are often recorded but many more on adjacent properties were probably missed.

Tree sparrow: *Passer montanus*.
Recorded once, as a visitor in 1975.

Chaffinch: *Fringilla coelebs*.
One of the regular territory holders since the beginning. The number of territories varying from 5 in the early years to 17 in 1985, but more usually 10 to 15. See table.

Greenfinch: *Carduelis chloris*.
Present almost every year since the early years but with one or two peculiar absences in the late 1980s and 1990. When territories are formed they vary from one to three. See table.

Goldfinch: *Carduelis carduelis*.
A fairly regular species. Usually with one to three territories. See table.

Siskin: *Carduelis spinus*.
A winter visitor to bird tables especially with seed and peanut feeders. Present into April but absent afterwards. With increasing colonisation of conifer plantations by this species it may well become a territory holder in the future.

Linnet: *Carduelis cannabina*.
A colonial species and very fond of nesting in gorse bushes. Sadly the numbers are dwindling nationally due to lack of suitable feed in the winter months. This is another regular bird on the Old Racecourse. In the 1960s the estimated number of pairs was between 12 and 18. In the 1970s it was from 5 to 13 and in the 1990s from one to eight. See table.

Lesser redpoll: *Carduelis flammea*.
An interesting species. Nationally this bird had an increase in population during the 1970s but a rapid decline thereafter. This was truly reflected on the Old Racecourse with one territory from 1966 to 1968 increasing annually to seven by 1979 but decreasing to visitor status in 1983 and remaining so with an occasional territory or two. This species is fond of young conifer plantations. See table.

Bullfinch: *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*.

A fairly regular bird since the beginning, sometimes as a visitor but often as a territory holder, now and then reaching three. See table.

Hawfinch: *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*.

A winter visitor to the Old Racecourse. I have flushed one off a puddle by Chains Cottage a few times when making early visits in March and April.

Yellowhammer: *Emberiza citrinella*.

From 1964 to 1997 this species held a number of territories and for the first 30 years was considered to be a bird of gorse and scrub. There were from five to fourteen territories up to 1993. Since then numbers decreased dramatically to two in 1997 and it was absent in 1998. Nationally this is another species in decline. See table.

Reed bunting: *Emberiza schoeniculus*.

Perhaps an unlikely bird for the racecourse as this species does prefer wet areas but in 1965 there was one territory by the pond on the North Common. In 1967 there were two with one on the North Common and one on the South Common. For the next few years there was just one on the North Common until 1971. After this the species appeared as a visitor in 1972 and 1974. During a spring visit in 1995 I was pleased to see one on the North Common again but this was chased off by one of the dwindling yellowhammers and was not seen again.

Population trends of selected species 1964-2000

Figures are given in 5 years intervals to simplify results, starting with 1964.

V indicates that the species only qualified as a visitor.

	1965	1970	1975	980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Cuckoo	1	1	1	1	1	V	V	0
Skylark	3	1	V	V	0	0	0	0
Tree pipit	0	1	5	5	7	1	1	2
Meadow pipit	4	8	3	4	1	1	1	2
Wren	1	4	13	3	8	10	11	17
Dunnock	8	10	6	9	4	10	9	6
Robin	7	3	7	6	11	15	20	24
Common redstart	0	0	0	0	V	3	1	1
Whinchat	8	6	4	3	0	0	0	0
Blackbird	11	11	11	11	11	12	15	15
Song thrush	2	6	6	3	1	1	2	2
Common whitethroat	8	2	2	2	V	V	V	0
Garden warbler	0	1	1	1	2	3	6	4
Blackcap	0	0	0	0	V	1	0	4
Chiffchaff	0	1	0	0	0	V	1	4
Willow warbler	13	16	15	23	34	27	36	38
Blue tit	0	1	2	3	5	6	6	4
Great tit	V	1	2	1	4	2	6	2
Nuthatch	0	V	0	0	V	1	1	2
Chaffinch	5	4	7	13	17	16	10	12
Greenfinch	0	2	V	1	V	0	2	3
Goldfinch	0	1	1	1	1	1	3	2
Linnet	17	13	7	8	1	4	4	3
Lesser redpoll	0	4	4	7	1	V	0	V
Bullfinch	1	V	1	V	1	1	1	3
Yellowhammer	9	10	7	13	14	8	3	0