

St David's Little Dewchurch Churchyard Bird Survey December 2006 - July 2007

The importance of churchyards for wildlife is well known. In a census carried out by the British Trust for Ornithology of twelve English churchyards between 1971 and 1981 the commonest breeding birds were ranked as follows: blackbird, greenfinch, robin, song thrush, house sparrow, blue tit, wren, dunnock, starling, great tit, chaffinch, bullfinch, spotted flycatcher, linnet, goldcrest and mistle thrush. In 1972 the Church of England Board for Social Responsibility of the General Synod commissioned and published a booklet, 'Wildlife Conservation in the Care of Churches and Churchyards' which detailed how the wildlife of the churchyard could be conserved without conflicting with the main work of the church.

A brief quotation from 'God's Acre' indicates the importance of churchyards for wildlife: "In some counties the churchyard is the last reserve for wildlife in the parish. A churchyard may have its origins in prehistory, but its importance as a place for quiet reflection and the appreciation of the beauty and diversity of nature may extend far into the future,"

BIRD SURVEY

The survey was carried out from December 2006 to July 2007 so as to give some indication of wintering birds and possible breeding birds. In all six visits were made each lasting some two to three hours and all birds seen were recorded noting any signs of breeding during the March to July visits. The results of the six visits were as follows:-

2nd December 2006

(Warm, cloudy & dry)

Buzzard
Woodpigeon 5
Wren
Dunnock
Robin 2
Blackbird
Mistle Thrush
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Magpie
Carrion Crow 3
Raven
Starling
Chaffinch

5th February 2007

(Cool, cloudy, good sunny periods)

Pheasant
Woodpigeon 2
Collared Dove 1
Pied Wagtail 1
Wren 2
Robin 2
Blackbird 4
Blue Tit 2
Great Tit 2
Jackdaw 9
Carrion Crow 4
House Sparrow 2
Greenfinch 2

26th March 2006

(Warm sunny afternoon)

Buzzard
Pheasant 2
Woodpigeon 3
Dunnock
Robin 2
Blackbird 5
Blue Tit 5
Great Tit 2

18th May 2007

(Warm, cloudy, showers)

Pheasant
Woodpigeon 4
Swift 2
House Martin 1
Robin 2
Blackbird 4
Chiffchaff 1
Blue Tit 3

Jackdaw 4
Carrion Crow 3
Raven 2
Chaffinch 2
Greenfinch 4

Nuthatch Pair feeding young
in nest-box
Carrion Crow 3
Starling 5
Chaffinch 2
Greenfinch 2

9th June 2007

(Very warm sunny day, some cloud)

Pheasant
Buzzard
Woodpigeon 4
Collared Dove 3
Swallow
House Martin 6
Robin
Blackbird 4
Trecreeper
Magpie
Jackdaw
Carrion Crow 3
Starling 4
Chaffinch 2
Greenfinch 3

2nd July 2007

(Heavy rain, lane below church flooded)

Woodpigeon
Little Owl
Green Woodpecker
House Martin
Wren
Robin 2
Blackbird 4
Blue Tit
Carrion Crow
Greenfinch 4

Twenty eight species were recorded over the six visits as follows:-

Pheasant	Swallow	Mistle Thrush	Jackdaw
Buzzard	House Martin	Chiffchaff	Carrion Crow
Woodpigeon	Pied Wagtail	Blue Tit	Raven
Collared Dove	Wren	Great Tit	Starling
Little Owl	Dunnock	Nuthatch	House Sparrow
Swift	Robin	Trecreeper	Chaffinch
Green Woodpecker	Blackbird	Magpie	Greenfinch

The only positive breeding record was of a pair of Nuthatches that nested in an artificial tit box and were seen to carry food into the box at two or three minute intervals on the 18th May. By the next visit on the 9th of June the young had fledged. Probable breeding with birds singing over territory, birds seen carrying food or nesting material were noted in robin, blackbird, blue tit, chaffinch and greenfinch. We have no doubt that more nest-boxes put up on suitable trees would encourage more birds to breed in the churchyard.

CONCLUSION

The following extracts have been taken from "Birds and Wildlife in Churchyards" published by RSPB Information.

"Churchyards are sanctuaries for birds and other wildlife as well as for people. They are rarely disturbed and in many cases are managed in a way that encourages both plants and animals to prosper, forming an oasis for wildlife amongst agricultural prairies or urban sprawl. To be truly useful for birds there must be places for breeding and roosting, food and protection from predators.

The first step towards encouraging more birds is to provide suitable trees' Many churchyards contain large mature trees. While these are good for birds, one day they will become old and possibly dangerous. It is important, therefore, to have some young trees to provide cover should the older trees die. When planting new trees make sure that they are not planted where their roots may undermine a building or wall.

Whenever possible native trees should be planted because they support more insect life than introduced species. Oak, ash, birch, lime and elm are all good. Yew trees have long been associated with churchyards and being evergreens they provide warm, safe roosting places in winter as well as berries for birds. Holly is a good choice as it is attractive, provides berries and makes a safe, cat-proof nesting place. Rowan, crab-apple and bird cherry all provide fruit for birds.

Two berry-bearing plants that make particularly good hedges are hawthorn and blackthorn. If planted close enough they grow into impenetrable barriers. Existing walls or old tree trunks are excellent bases up which honeysuckle and ivy can climb. Honeysuckle is attractive, smells nice and provides nesting places. Ivy is excellent because it gives cover, its flowers attract insects (and thus birds) and its berries appear late in the winter when other food is scarce. Ivy does not damage trees or brickwork provided that the mortar is sound. Bramble and dog-rose are also easy to grow and provide nesting places and food.

Modern farming practices have destroyed much of the ancient grassland and its plants but many churchyards have grassland that has not been ploughed for hundreds of years. In these you can find unusual and locally rare plants. Many are the only remaining patches of old pasture. Do not cut the grass too frequently. Allow it to grow a little longer around the edges of the churchyard because rough grass provides cover for mice and voles which are the food of birds of prey and owls.

There are a wide choice of plants that are beneficial to birds either by directly providing food or by attracting insects. Sunflowers provide seeds that will attract many birds. Wild poppies are always attractive and provide plenty of seeds. Nettles should also be tolerated as they are particularly important as the food plant of many butterfly caterpillars. Thistles are always attractive to finches. They can either be allowed to grow wild at the edges or an ornamental variety could be used. Teasel is similarly good for finches.

Nestboxes can be very useful to birds which normally rely on natural holes in mature trees. Great, blue and coal tits will readily use them. Robins and spotted flycatchers will use an open fronted design. Larger boxes can attract stock doves, little owls and jackdaws.

Some churches themselves become the home for kestrels or even barn owls which are now becoming rare. Both can be encouraged to breed by using nestboxes.

Birds can be a problem in some churches. For example, pigeons and sparrows may get inside and cause a mess. In such cases the best way to prevent this is to ensure that there is no access to the church. Cover any openings that they use. If you have pigeons in a church tower they will certainly move if you can attract a kestrel to breed! In serious cases advice should be sought from a pest-control firm. Some churches still retain wooden shingles and from time to time these may be attacked by woodpeckers in search of food. The only way to prevent this is by covering the wood with, for example, a sheet of plastic which forces the bird to look elsewhere. In the winter an alternative food source could provide the answer as great spotted woodpeckers are particularly fond of suet and peanuts.

Maintenance and management of the churchyard is important. Weedkillers can have a devastating effect on the wildlife as their use results not only in a loss of plants but also the insects associated with them. Clearing an area of one type of weed will often allow another more persistent

and less beneficial species to take over. Above all remember that the vegetation in a churchyard may be the sole survivor of the grassland vegetation that once covered the local countryside. Many rare and endangered plant species have their last stronghold in churchyards.

Many churches are the home of bats and their conservation is very important. Timber treatment can kill off a population of bats and if you are contemplating this contact the Nature Conservancy Council or local Naturalists' Trust beforehand."

REFERENCES:

God's Acre - The Flowers and Animals of the Parish Churchyard Francesca Greenoak, published by Orbis London 1985

The Churchyards Handbook The Rev. Stapleton, published by the Church Information Office.

Wild Life Conservation in the care of churches and churchyards G.M.A. Barker, published by the Church Information Office.

Life in the Graveyard A. Chater. *The Natural World* 6 (Winter 1982) pages 17-19 published by RSNC