

# On Her Majesty's Service

WASC 542





September 1969

## Notes on the Birds of ERDE (North Site)

by T.J. Lewis

Introduction

For such a small area the bird-life of ERDE is exceptionally diverse. This is due to the several types of habitat which are present. These include the following:

- (a) The alder-woods. Three main areas attract large numbers of finches in winter, including siskin, goldfinch, redpoll and brambling. Like all winter visitors, numbers are very variable. In some years several hundred siskins may be present, in other years only about 30. Blackcaps, garden warblers, breed.
- (b) New Hill. Many acres of uncut heathland. Linnets, reed buntings and yellowhammers are amongst the breeding species.
- (c) The waterways. Kingfishers occasionally breed, and are fairly frequent throughout the rest of the year. Herons are common. Sedge and reed warblers nest. Many mallard and teal in winter and the occasional grey wagtail.
- (d) The flooded gravel pits. These come right to the establishment edge on the north and west sides and may be observed from within the boundary fence. Great crested grebe and tufted duck breed. In winter pochard, gadwall, shoveler and occasionally wigeon are present.
- (e) Water meadows, inside and outside the establishment. Redwing, fieldfare snipe and meadow pipit in winter. Yellow wagtail in summer.
- (f) Ploughed agricultural land on NE side. Redshanks nest.

Systematic observations have been made since 1964. Much credit must go to Paul Allen, an expert ornithologist, who was with us until the summer of 1966. Since then a small group including Dave Ashen, David Debenham, Kim Henshaw and the author have kept up the observations. These have been restricted to lunch-times only, which accounts for the paucity of owl records. Any observations from those who are around the establishment at night would be very welcome. Surprising omissions include the lesser whitethroat, common redstart and nuthatch.

The ERDE list now stands at 98 species of which about 58 have nested, at least on occasion. Birds seen in the immediate neighbourhood of ERDE (about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile) are included, and this encompasses the north side and west side gravel pits. The arrangement of the list follows the Wetmore order of classification, which has now come into general acceptance. This follows a sequence of evolutionary development, from the primitive grebes to the advanced passerines.

/Classified list

### Classified list

- Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) Common on gravel pits around establishment, and occasionally seen on rivers inside boundary fence. At least 6 breeding pairs in immediate vicinity (1969).
- Little Grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*) Occasionally seen in winter. No evidence of nesting, but the thickness of nettles along rivers in summer could cause the species to be overlooked.
- Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) Common along the waterways. As many as 15 sometimes seen together in the more remote parts. Most birds presumably are from the Walthamstow heronry.
- Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*) Generally one nesting pair.
- Canadian Goose (*Branta Canadensis*) A pair appeared on the N.Side gravel pit in May 1968. They were made unwelcome by the resident mute swan and did not stay long.
- Mallard. (*Anas platyrhynchos*) Probably 3 or 4 nesting pairs. Flocks of up to 50 on remote waterways in winter.
- Teal (*Anas crecca*) Flocks of about 15 often present on remote waterways in winter.
- Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) 3 wintered on gravel pit on west side of establishment (1968-9)
- Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) An occasional winter visitor to surrounding pits.
- Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*) Most often seen on west side pit as a passage migrant in March.
- Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*) Common nesting species in surrounding pits. Numbers increase in winter, and a few birds are generally to be seen inside the establishment.
- Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) Present in winter in considerable numbers on the west side pit. Arrives from the end of August.
- Smew (*Mergus albellus*) 3 females seen in establishment during the winter of 1964/5.
- Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) 3 birds seen wheeling over the North Woods, November 1966. Single bird seen on March 16, 1967.  
(Birds seen in the Eastern Counties during winter are generally emigrant from the continent. These birds could possibly have been Rough Legged Buzzards)
- Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) Bird seen proceeding northwards about 80ft above the western boundary river at about 12.45 p.m. May 31, 1965.  
Individual birds are occasionally seen in the Lea valley on spring migration, and one has been known to pass several days at a local pit.
- Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) Often seen, particularly in winter, but no evidence of nesting inside establishment.
- Red-legged partridge (*Alectoris rufa*) A few nesting pairs.
- Partridge (*Perdix perdix*) One or two breeding in New Hill area.

/Pheasant



Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) Common in many areas. Both the ring-necked and Old English varieties are present. Melanistic mutant seen on New Hill on September 12, 1969.

Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) Very common along waterways.

Coot (*Fulica atra*) Very common on surrounding pits, and has bred inside establishment.

Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) Nests in fields near establishment. Numbers much increased in autumn and winter.

Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) Often seen in winter, generally on meadows near water just outside boundary fence.

Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) Generally a few birds winter in the North Wood and other similar areas, but not very easy to find.

Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) A regular passage migrant in the Lea Valley but only one record inside ERDE. One was flushed from the western boundary river on March 5, 1968, and characteristically towered to about 200 ft.

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Redshank (*Tringa totanus*) Nests in fields adjacent to establishment. Only present during actual breeding period (early spring), after which dispersal occurs.

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) In winter over 100,000 gulls of this and the following species are said to roost on the reservoirs of the Lea Valley. Any might be seen at ERDE or, more likely, on neighbouring meadows. The great black-back has been seen several times but is not common. (Perhaps 50 is about the average winter population of the Valley.)

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) After the black-headed gull, this is the most common gull in the Lea Valley (Perhaps 10,000 birds). Both the British race (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) and the darker-backed Scandinavian race (*Larus fuscus fuscus*) are present.

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) Although the commonest gull around our coast, it is not particularly common in the Lea Valley (Perhaps 500-1000 birds).

Common Gull (*Larus canus*) Seen about as often as the Herring Gull. The Valley winter population is probably about the same as this species.

Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) The commonest gull by far. Begins to arrive in early July, the vast majority coming from Scandinavia.

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) For the past two years (1968/9) a pair have nested on an island on the pit immediately north of the establishment. Breeding did not appear to be successful, and each year the birds have been present only during May.

Stock Dove (*Columba oenas*) Occasionally noticed, but generally overlooked, being taken for a "Blue Checker" type domestic bird.

Woodpigeon (*Columba Palumbus*) A common nesting species.

Domestic Pigeon. Various types are feral in the establishment and breed in roofs of buildings etc.

/Turtle Dove



Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) A summer visitor seen with reasonable frequency, and might possibly nest inside the establishment.

Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decocto*) Only occasionally seen, and not thought to be a nesting species.

Cuckoo (*Cuculus Canorus*) Present throughout summer in the wooded areas.

Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) For several years (1965-7) a single bird roosted beneath a derelict building in the North Woods. This building has now been demolished, and although old pellets have been found in another building there is no evidence that the bird is still in the establishment.

Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) Only one visual record, and no information on night calls. Pellets sometimes found which are probably those of the Tawny.

Swift (*Apus apus*) Common throughout establishment, but it is not known to nest within the boundary fence. Arrives late April.

Kingfisher (*Alcedo otthis*) Fairly common outside the breeding season, and occasionally nests. The last observed nesting attempt (unsuccessful due to collapsed bank) was in April 1966, but successful nesting in 1969 was almost certain. A family fished on the West river below the weir throughout the second half of August.

Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) Seen fairly frequently, and there is probably a breeding pair.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos minor*) One record only, Jan.13, 1966. Seen drumming on tree in North Woods.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) Common in neighbourhood and a nesting species on New Hill.

Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) A common nesting species from mid-April onwards.

House Martin (*Delichon urbica*) A common nesting species. From mid-April.

Sand Martin (*Riparia riparia*) Large numbers nest along the river banks. Particularly spectacular are the pre-migration gatherings in mid-August at certain well-defined points in the establishment, up to 1000 birds being present within a very small area. Numbers are considerably down in 1969, probably due to strong northerly winds throughout March. Arrives last week in March-first week in April.

Carrion crow (*Corvus corone corone*) Several pairs nest in the establishment.

Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) Common in establishment, but there is no rookery.

Jackdaw (*Corvus n. nedula*) More common in winter, but probably a few nest.

Magpie (*Pica pica*) Frequently seen, but not thought to nest.

Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) One or two nesting pairs.

Great Tit (*Parus major*) Common throughout establishment.

Blue Tit (*Parus caeruleus*) Common throughout establishment.

Coal Tit (*Parus ater*) A few nest, but is much less common than the two following species. Rather more frequent in winter.

/Marsh Tit



- Marsh Tit (*Parus palustris*) Common throughout establishment.
- Willow Tit (*Parus montanus*) Common, but very difficult to distinguish from the marsh tit.
- Long-tailed Tit. (*Aegithalos caudatus*) A few nesting pairs. Parties of 20 or more are common in winter.
- Treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*) Quite common, but a difficult bird to estimate numbers.
- Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) Common throughout establishment.
- Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) Probably two or three nesting pairs.
- Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) Winter visitor. Sometimes seen inside the boundary but more frequently on adjacent meadows.
- Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) Common throughout establishment.
- Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) Common winter visitor. Can generally be seen from October to March on the Long Walk meadow. The numbers seem to fluctuate rather less from year to year than those of other winter visitors, such as siskin and redpoll.
- Blackbird. (*Turdus merula*) Common throughout establishment.
- Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) Rare passage migrant. One record only, Sept. 12, 1968, on New Hill.
- Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*) Passage migrant. First noted on Sept. 5, 1969 and then on Sept. 11, 1969 on New Hill (single female). Probably overlooked in the past.
- Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) Does not nest, but one was heard singing on two consecutive lunchtimes in 1968 in the North Woods.
- Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) Common throughout establishment.
- Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) Generally one or two nesting pairs. Arrives mid-April.
- Sedge Warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*) Common along waterways. Generally about a dozen nesting pairs. Arrives mid-April.
- Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) Common in wooded areas. About 12 nesting pairs. Generally arrives mid-April.
- Garden Warbler (*Sylvia borin*) One or two nesting pairs in North Woods. Mid-April.
- Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*) Common nesting species (New Hill and other open areas) Arrives mid-April.
- Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) Very common in both wooded and open areas. Generally arrives late March or early April.
- Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) Several nesting pairs in the wooded areas. Invariably the first summer visitor to arrive, generally mid-March. (March 16, 1966; March 16, 1967, March 25, 1968; April 2, 1969)
- Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) Generally a few birds (half a dozen or so) Present in winter. Alder woods.

/Spotted



- Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) Common summer visitor, but late arrival (May) prevents any estimate of numbers.
- Hedge Sparrow (*Prunella modularis*) Common throughout establishment.
- Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*) Sometimes seen in winter on Long Walk meadow when in partial flood.
- Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) Common breeding species, generally close to buildings.
- Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) One or two birds generally present in winter in neighbourhood of weir.
- Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) A few nesting pairs along boundary rivers. Arrives late April-early May.
- Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) Common throughout establishment.
- Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*) Common nesting species.
- Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) Common nesting species. In summer mainly on New Hill and other open places. In winter the numbers are greatly increased by immigrants from the Continent, and huge numbers are sometimes present in the wooded areas, where they feed on the seeds of the alder. As with most winter visitors, there are large year to year fluctuations. Estimated North Site winter populations:- 1966/7, 120; 1967/8, 350; 1968/9, 50.
- Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) The bird for which ERDE is ornithologically famous. During most winters the alder trees attract flocks which are probably the largest in the country, although, as the following figures show, numbers are very variable. North Site only, estimated winter population:- 1964/5, 220; 1965/6, 350; 1966/7, 100; 1967/8, 30; 1968/9, 30. The bird generally arrives late, December, sometimes January, but may not depart until early April.
- Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*) A common nesting species, particularly in the New Hill area.
- Redpoll (*Carduelis flammea*) Present only in winter, in association with siskins. Estimated North Site population 1965/6, 50; 1966/7, 40; 1967/8, 10; 1968/9, 10.
- Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) Several breeding pairs. Winter population about 20 birds.
- Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) Common nesting species. Variably increased by winter visitors. North Site population (winter):- 1966/7, 30; 1967/8, 100; 1968/9, 20.
- Brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*) Irregular winter visitor. The largest irruption was in February 1968, when about 15 birds were present in the North Woods throughout the month.
- Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*) One or two nesting pairs on New Hill.
- Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) Common on open ground, particularly New Hill, where there is at least one nesting pair.
- House Sparrow. (*Passer domesticus*) Common around buildings.
- Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) At least two breeding colonies of this species in the North Woods.



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