

The Bird Life
of Keele University

David W. Emley

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David Emley, who plays an active part in local natural history societies, joined the Geology Department at Keele in 1974. Since then he has spent much of his spare time studying and recording the animals and plants of the Keele estate. This booklet is the first result of his work; it incorporates records from an earlier publication "The Birds and Butterflies of Keele Woods" (1975) by Cantelo, Griffiths and Robinson, which has been out of print for several years.

K. M. Goodway Chairman, Grounds Sub-Committee

THE BIRDS OF KEELE

Introduction

Bird-watching is becoming an increasingly popular pastime and numerous books, periodicals and optical aids have been produced to cater for the amateur ornithologist. However the identification of birds can only be learned when books are combined with fieldwork. At Keele we are lucky in having an area of woodland and fields that is criss-crossed by paths along which people can walk and see many of the common species of birds at close quarters.

The estate, as we see it today, was landscaped and planted up by Ralph Sneyd in the first half of the 19th century. In more recent years an area of conifers has been planted to the south, near the M6 motorway. The sewage plant with its old-style filter beds is especially important to the birds and the playing-fields bordering the Newcastle-Keele road are used as roosting grounds for gulls in winter. The series of seven lakes support several species of waterfowl but are too small to attract any large numbers of wintering ducks.

The booklet is in two parts. Firstly a guided walk, picking out areas of interest and the birds to be found there. Secondly a systematic list of species that have been recorded on the Keele estate and Home Farm. Details of the birds' status, numbers and in the case of migrants, the average dates of arrival are included. It is hoped that this will stimulate readers to forward their own records, be they of common or not so common species, to either David Emley (Geology) or Bill Pigram (Physics).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. W. Pigram for reading and commenting on the manuscript and for making available to me his file of sightings. Many people have contributed records over the years but above all I thank J. Martin, I. and N. Machin and W. J. Low.

Mrs. J. Install of the Geology Department typed the text, Mr. G. Barber of the Geography Department prepared the map and Mr. W. J. Low drew the illustrations. My thanks to them all.

David W. Emley

There are numerous books that deal with bird identification and general ornithology. Below is a list of some of the books most frequently recommended, all of which are currently in print (1980).

Bruun, B. & Singer, A. The Hamlyn Guide to Birds of Britain and Europe. Collins.

Conder, P. RSPB Guide to Birdwatching. Hamlyn. Fisher, J. & Flegg, J. Watching Birds. Poyser.

Hayman, P. & Burton, P. Bird Life of Britain. Mitchell Beazley.

Heinzel, H., Fitter, R & Parslow, J. The Birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East. Collins.

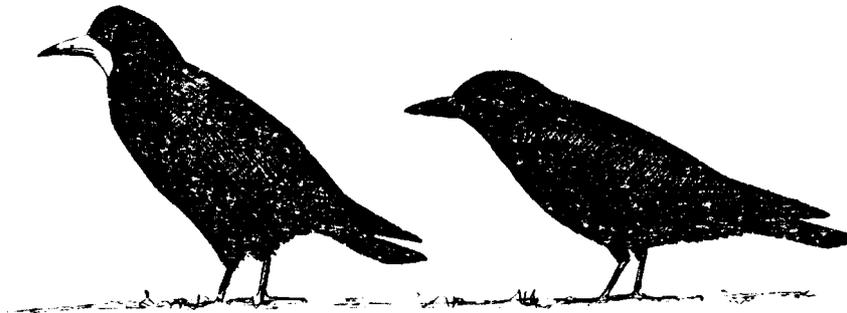
Hammond, N. & Everett, M. Birds of Britain and Europe. Pan.

Peterson, R., Mountford, G. & Hollom, P. A. D. Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe. Collins.

Saunders, D. RSPB Guide to the Birds of Britain. Hamlyn.

From the car-park, by the Students' Union building, take the path leading to Keele Hall.

1) Notice, on the right, the rookery situated in the plantation behind the Library. There are usually upwards of thirty nests. In the early part of the year the nest-building and displaying of the rooks is very noticeable. During the day the rooks feed on the surrounding farmland.



Rook

Carrion Crow

On reaching Keele Hall take the path on the left that goes down the side of the tall wall by the kitchens. Continue around to the right until you come to the side of the first lake.

2) The three species of waterfowl that breed at Keele can be seen on this lake. These are the coot, moorhen and little grebe. The mute swan used to breed but were absent for several years until four juvenile birds were transferred to Keele from Madeley pond in 1980. Two have since died. The coot is easily distinguished as it is all black except for a white forehead, the moorhen (often seen wandering around on the paths and lawn) is a dark purple with a red and yellow bill and white markings on the tail, while the little grebe is the smallest of the three being a chestnut colour and diving quickly when disturbed. All three species feed on bottom vegetation so the shallow lakes at Keele are especially suited to them. The mud at the head of this lake attracts a number of species that come either to feed or to drink, grey and pied wagtails especially. In the summer swallows and swifts may be seen hawking for insects over the lake and lawns. You may be lucky enough to see kingfishers which put in occasional appearances.



Little Grebe

Coot

Moorhen

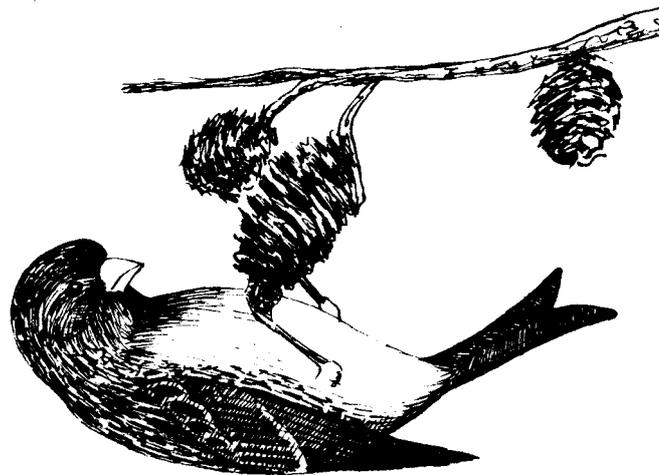
Continue along the path the end of the third lake.

3) The 'jetty' sticking out into the lake is a favourite spot of the grey wagtail - a relative of the pied wagtail with grey upper-parts and yellow underparts and of course a long wagging tail. Grey wagtails are always found in association with flowing water especially in upland areas and at least two pairs breed at Keele most years.

Continue across the dam and along the path until you come to the steps leading to Barne's Dell on your right.

4) The tall trees in the Dell are alders and they can be found round all of the lakes at Keele. The alder catkin (looking like a cone) is an important source of food for several species of bird in the winter. In order to get at the alder seed a bird must have a thin, pointed beak and the birds concerned have just that. The two main species are redpoll and siskin. The redpoll is a small brown finch with a red crown and black bib whereas the siskin is a yellowy-green finch with a black crown and black markings in wing and tail. Some redpolls may be seen all the year round but siskins are strictly winter visitors.

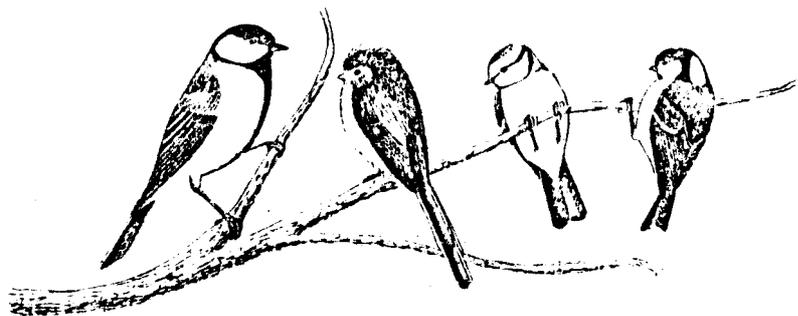
Both are very agile and can often be seen clinging upside-down on the alder catkins in a manner similar to members of the tit family.



Redpoll

Continue along the path through the wood.

5). Many of the breeding birds can be seen at one time or another as you walk through the wood. The leaf litter is favoured by the blackbirds, song thrushes and great tits in the winter, while the blue and coal tits may be seen feeding in the branches above, joined occasionally by a flock of long-tailed tits. In the summer the leaves prevent many of the birds being seen so we have to rely on hearing their characteristic songs. The great tit has many different calls, the commonest being 'teecher, teecher, teecher'. It is very difficult to put into words most of the bird songs but many recordings are available today. One of the summer visitors, the chiffchaff, can only be reliably separated from its near relative the willow warbler by the difference in song. Both species are common at Keele. The song of the chiffchaff is a disyllabic 'chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff' while that of the willow warbler is a melodious warble. While both warblers may be found together, the chiffchaff prefers the areas with taller trees and the willow warbler the lower, more scrubby areas.



Great
Tit

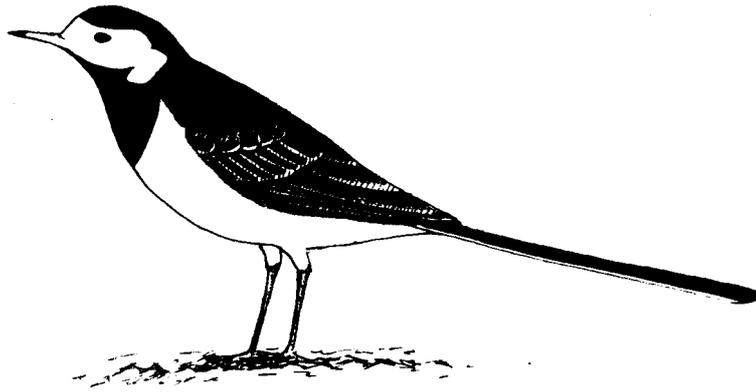
Long-tailed
Tit

Blue
Tit

Coal
Tit

Continue along the path until you reach the gate leading down to the sewage plant.

6) This is a very interesting area for birds especially as the plant has the older-type filter and settling beds. The tall trees on the right are good places to see goldcrests, long-tailed tits and treecreepers, while the hollow gate-post is the nest-site of a pair of blue tits in the summer. In the winter the filter beds provide an important source of food for many species of birds, the main ones being pied and grey wagtails, meadow pipits, chaffinches, wren and blackbirds.



Pied Wagtail

In severe winters the two migrant thrushes the fieldfare and redwing may come down to feed. In the early part of winter the yew berries are especially attractive to mistle thrushes and greenfinches with several hundred of the latter being present some years. In the spring early hatches of midges provide food for newly-arrived migrants, some of which are staying, others just passing through. These include swallows, sand and house martins, yellow wagtails, willow and wood warblers, blackcaps, garden warblers and chiffchaffs.



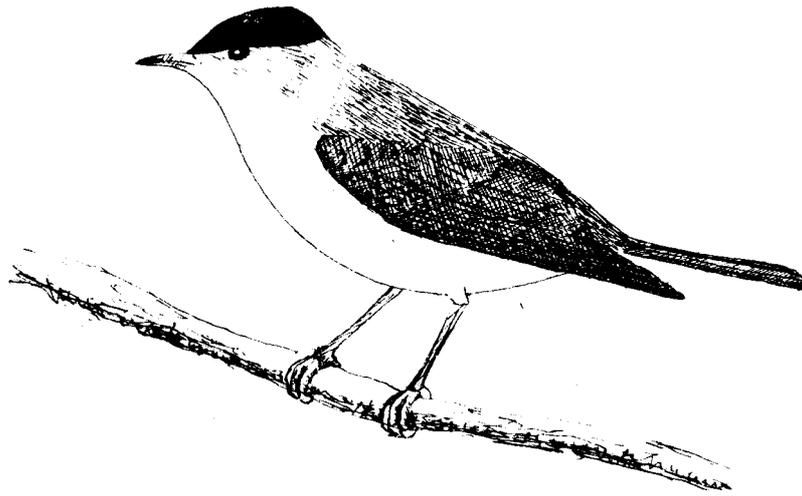
House
Martin

Swallow

Swift

Follow the path through the gate, alongside the filter and settling beds and continue until the track bears to the right.

7) The area of birch and willow scrub on the left, between the path and the motorway, is a favoured nesting area for willow warblers and blackcaps. The male blackcap has a black crown while the female has a brown one. The song of the blackcap is very similar to its close relative the garden warbler which also breeds at Keele. It is often necessary to see the songster to confirm its identification. Luckily the two are distinct, the garden warbler being a plain greyish brown, and usually preferring a much thicker scrub than the blackcap.

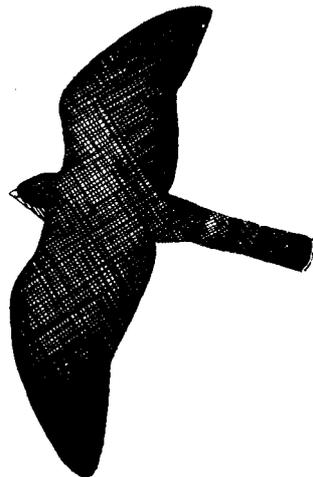


Blackcap

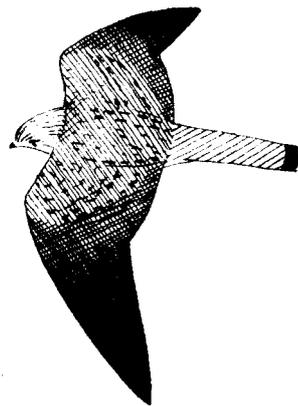
8) The conifer plantation on the right is a good place to see or rather hear the goldcrest, Britains' smallest breeding bird. It is olive in colour with a golden crest, which in the male is admixed with red. The call is a high-pitched 'zee zee zee zee zee Another bird, characteristic of conifers, is the coal tit. It is the smallest member of the tit family and is specially adapted to feeding amongst pine-needles and cones in having a much finer and narrower beak than other tits. It is also the only tit to have an all black head apart from a white patch on the nape.

Continue along the path until you meet the track from the left.

9) It is very difficult to say that you will see a certain species in a certain place. This is especially true of the birds of prey that hunt over the grounds, namely the kestrel and sparrowhawk. However there are more records of sparrowhawk seen from this spot than elsewhere. In flight the sparrowhawk has rounded wing-tips while the kestrels are pointed. Notice how, quite often, the general bird-song subsides when a sparrowhawk flies over.



Sparrowhawk



Kestrel

Continue along the path to the sixth lake.

10) Little grebes regularly breed here, liking the thick, overhanging rhododendrons. The scrubby vegetation around the lake and on the bank attracts blackcaps and garden warblers while wood

warblers occur most springs. 1979 was exceptional in that a wood warbler was heard singing throughout most of the summer, indicating possible breeding. The stream issuing from the lake by the old wheel-house attracts the odd grey wagtail.

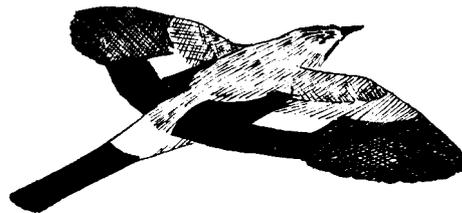
Continue along the path. Double back round the sharp right-hand corner and up to the top of Beech Clump.

11) The fruits of the beech tree (called mast) are very attractive to tits and finches and in years of plenty, small flocks can sometimes be seen feeding under the trees.

Continue down the path until you emerge from the trees.

12) Facing you is an area that was clear-felled of conifers in 1974 and has since been replanted with hornbeam, sweet chestnut and larch. Areas of newly-planted woodland are especially attractive to certain species of birds. One in particular is the tree-pipit. This bird has the habit of perching in the top of a tree and then parachuting to the ground whilst delivering its song. There have been occasional records of this species on passage but in 1978 a bird was heard singing over an extended period. It is hoped that it may breed in the future.

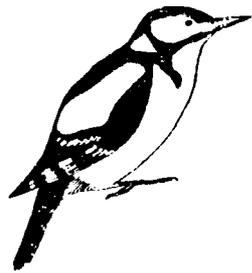
13) The mixed plantation that you have just walked through is a good place to see the jay. The jay is the only member of the crow family that is restricted to woodland habitats. It is a very colourful bird being pink with flashes of blue on the wing and a white rump which is very conspicuous as the bird flies away.



Jay

Continue left along the path, along the side of lakes 5 and 4 until you reach Barne's Dell again. Go across the Dell and up the steps on the far side. Turn left then immediately right.

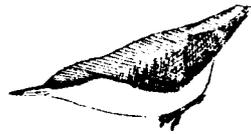
14) If time permits it is worth taking one of the paths that go through the woodland of Mill Green on the right. As well as the species mentioned in 5 you may see the great-spotted woodpecker or hear it as it drums on an old tree-trunk. Two other typical woodland birds to be seen here are the nuthatch and treecreeper. Both search for insects on the trunks of trees but in different ways. The treecreeper starts at the base of a tree and works upwards in a spiral and on reaching the top flies down to the base of another tree. The nuthatch does not have a definite pattern but seems to prefer the higher branches and as its name suggests, takes many seeds. The treecreeper is totally insectivorous and has a long, down-curved beak to enable it to reach insects resting in cracks in the bark. Should you hear a lot of commotion from blackbirds and mistle thrushes you may be lucky enough to see a tawny owl roosting in one of the trees. Birds often gang together in order to scare away a potential predator.



Great-spotted
Woodpecker



Treecreeper



Nuthatch

Continue along the path to a spot just past the wooden seat by the first lake.

15) Here notice the tall wellingtonia on the right. It has a reddish fibrous bark and is the tallest tree in the area. Since its introduction into this country in the 19th century, treecreepers have exploited its soft bark by excavating small roosting-holes in it. There are several of these holes in this particular tree. Not all the holes are used on any one night. The birds choose the holes to suit the wind direction.

Continue along the path, up the side of the refectory and back to the car park.

Systematic List

The list covers the period 1970-1979. Records were received from many people, the main ones being D. Emley, W. Pigram, W. Low and J. Martin. Records were abstracted from the Keele publication 'The Birds and Butterflies of Keele Woods' by J. Cantelo, R Griffiths and M. Robinson.

The area covered includes the whole of the University estate and Home Farm.

The following terms have been used in the list:

Resident: breeds in the area and present all year round.

Summer Resident: migrant arriving in spring and breeding.

Winter visitor: migrant arriving in autumn and staying until spring.

Passage migrant: migrant arriving in spring but only passing through.

Regular visitor: breeding outside area but often seen in the area.

Occasional visitor: up to ten records per year.

Vagrant: a rare visitor only a few records over the last ten years.

Little Grebe: resident, seen on all the lakes but most often on 1, 2 and 6.

Cormorant: vagrant. Two seen flying over 21/4/75.

Grey Heron: occasional visitor in all seasons. Usually seen flying over.

Mallard: occasional visitor. Female and ducklings seen 1978 and 1980.

Tufted Duck: winter visitor. Usually one or two on top lake most winters. Male and female stayed until June in 1977.

Pochard: winter visitor. A female usually present most years on top lake.

Canada Goose: two on 29/7/76. One disappeared, the other remaining through the winter before it was shot.

Mute Swan: resident and breeding up to 1978 when the last one was shot. Four introduced in 1980. Two surviving in July.

Sparrowhawk: regular visitor. More often seen towards the motorway.

Buzzard: vagrant. 4/5/75 one seen flying over Keele church (Mr. Paffard).

Kestrel: regular visitor. Used to breed in an old tree near sewage plant.

Red-legged Partridge: vagrant. One seen in fields near the Health Centre.

Grey Partridge: resident on Home Farm.

Pheasant: resident on Home Farm. A bird seen near Keele entrance to campus.

Water Rail: vagrant. One in 1972, one stayed for the winter of 1973/74.

Moorhen: resident, usually about twelve pairs.

Coot: resident, usually about two pairs.

Golden Plover: recorded flying over in 1971, 1972.

Lapwing: resident on Home Farm. Numbers occur on passage on Home Farm.

Snipe: occasional winter visitor on Home Farm.

Woodcock: occasional visitor. Records from 1974, 29/3/76, 7/12/77.

Whimbrel: vagrant. Twice heard at night flying over in April.

Curlew: rare visitor in summer on Home Farm. 3/4/76, 10/7/78.

Common Sandpiper: vagrant. One seen flying south 12/9/78 (W. Low).

Black-headed Gull: regular visitor especially in winter. Some roost on the playing fields.

Common Gull: winter visitor, occasionally seen on playing fields.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: regular visitor. Often seen flying over in the evenings to roost at Doddington pool. 52 on playing field 3/4/78.

Herring Gull: regular visitor, especially in winter.

Greater Black-backed Gull: occasionally seen flying over in winter.

Kittiwake: vagrant. One found dying in car-park 13/2/72.

Stock Dove: resident. Nests in holes in trees, particularly beech.

Wood Pigeon: resident, also roosting in yews and conifers.

Turtle Dove: vagrant. Two records in 1973 and one on 13/5/77.

Collared Dove: resident, preferring the campus buildings to the woods.

Cuckoo: vagrant, heard calling in spring 1980.

Barn Owl: used to be seen on Home Farm. No recent records.

Tawny Owl: resident. More often heard, has a characteristic 'kee-wik' call.

Little Owl: vagrant. Two records.

Swift: summer resident. Average arrival date 15th May. Several exceptional dates: 5/11/76, 26/11/76 and 30/4/77.

Kingfisher: occasional visitor. Report of two hitting windows of Education Department.

Hoopoe: vagrant. 12/5/75 near Clock House Drive (Dr. Ross). Believed a few earlier records. This is a rare bird in Staffordshire.

Green Woodpecker: often heard in spring but no records of breeding.

Great Spotted Woodpecker: resident, at least one pair.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker: resident, often overlooked.

Skylark: resident on Home Farm.

Swallow: summer resident, average arrival date end of April. A very late bird seen over sewage plant on 17/11/77.

House Martin: summer resident, average arrival 10th May.

Sand Martin: passage migrant. Small numbers seen in spring, usually around the sewage plant in company with swallows and house martins.

Carrion Crow: resident.

Rook: resident. Usually 20-30 nests behind the Library.

Jackdaw: resident. Small colony in a hole in a tree near lake 2.

Magpie: resident. A flock of 40 seen on Home Farm in March 1979.

Jay: resident. At least two pairs present.

Great Tit: resident. Seen in most parts of the area. 40 counted on 7/2/76.

Blue Tit: resident. Seen in most parts of the area. 80 counted on 3/12/77.

Coal Tit: resident, preferring the conifers.

Marsh Tit: occasional visitor. Seen during summer so may breed. Five on 29/1/77.

Willow Tit: occasional visitor. Seen during summer so may breed. Two on 12/4/77.

Long-tailed Tit: resident, often travels through wood in small parties.

Nuthatch: resident. Hole-nester often lining entrance of hole with mud.

Treecreeper: resident. Roost holes to be seen in the wellingtonias.

Wren: resident. Numbers affected by severe winters.

Mistle Thrush: resident and winter visitor. One of the earliest birds to breed, often in February. Attracted to yew berries in winter.

Fieldfare: winter visitor. Often seen in flocks on the fields or flying over. 350 seen 13/12/75.

Song Thrush: resident. Its song is usually repeated three times in succession.

Redwing: winter visitor. Often seen in flocks in fields or flying over. In severe weather become very tame and can be seen all over campus.

Blackbird: resident and winter visitor. One attempted to nest under the wheel-arch of a car in Geology Department car park

Wheatear: passage migrant. Sometimes seen on playing fields in spring. Two on 26/3/76, one in April 1978 forced down by snow storm.

Redstart: vagrant. Odd birds turn up on passage in spring. 1/6/74, 3/5/75.

Robin: resident.

Grasshopper Warbler: vagrant. One on 6/5/76. Apparently used to breed.

Sedge Warbler: vagrant. One record on 17/8/76.

Blackcap: summer resident, average arrival date 25th April. Seven singing 1977.

Garden Warbler: summer resident. Average date 7th May. Two singing 1977.

Whitethroat: vagrant. One record June 1971.

Lesser Whitethroat: vagrant. Two records 6/6/73, 1/5/77.

Willow Warbler: summer resident arriving 20th April. 24 singing 1977.

Chiffchaff: summer resident. First migrant to arrive, usually around 30th March. 14 singing 1977.

Wood Warbler: passage migrant. One or two heard most years in the spring. 1979 a bird was heard singing most of the summer, may have bred.

Goldcrest: resident preferring the conifers.

Spotted Flycatcher: summer resident arriving in mid May. Usually two pairs. Five birds seen on 27/9/76.

Pied Flycatcher: occasionally seen on passage in spring. A female on 13/5/77.

Dunnock: resident.

Meadow Pipit: winter and spring visitor. More often seen around the sewage plant. 15 on 24/1/76, 45 on 9/4/77, 25 on 30/3/78.

Tree Pipit: passage migrant, one singing for extended period from 19/6/78.

Pied Wagtail: resident and winter visitor. 30-40 on 21/12/76, 20 on 17/11/77.

Grey Wagtail: resident. Usually at least two pairs.

Yellow Wagtail: passage migrant. 17/4/74, 24/4/77, five on 29/4/77.

Starling: resident and winter visitor, local birds supplemented by birds from Scandinavia and the Baltic.

Greenfinch: resident and winter visitor. Up to 200 one year feeding on yew.

Goldfinch: resident and winter visitor. 100 on 24/4/77. Particularly fond of thistle seeds but will also feed on alder catkins.

Siskin: winter visitor. Has good and bad years. Feeds on alder catkins often with redpolls. 65 on 24/1/76, four on 4/1/77, six on 22/3/79.

Linnet: resident in small numbers.

Redpoll: resident and winter visitor. Feeds on alder catkins but in spring is very fond of larch seeds.
40 on 3/4/77, 30 on 17/11/77.

Bullfinch: resident.

Chaffinch: resident and winter visitor. Roosts in rhododendrons in winter.

Brambling: winter visitor. Eleven on 12/3/76, 100 31/3/79.

Yellowhammer: resident on Home Farm.

Reed Bunting: occasional visitor in winter.

House Sparrow: resident.

Tree Sparrow: resident on Home Farm. 25 noted in 1977.

Exotica

Muscovy Duck: one present on top lake 19-20/5/75.

