

## Birds

We are very fortunate in the village in that several people are highly knowledgeable in bird identification and the area is well-watched. Thus we have good records of the resident bird species as well as those seasonal or occasional avian visitors to Dry Drayton. Walker's book listed 47 species, but our list today is longer (nearly 100 recorded species). Among species that Walker saw in the last part of the 19th century were the Redstart, Nightjar, Nightingale and Wryneck. These summer migrant birds are not part of the village scene today. It is possible that a Redstart might be seen on passage, but that is all; it prefers western oakwoods as habitat. The Nightjar (or Goatsucker, so-called because this strange crepuscular bird was believed to drink the milk of goats !) has not been seen or its churring heard for many years in Cambridgeshire, although it still has important breeding colonies in Breckland. Although we have a post-1990 record for Nightingale in the village, there is no suitable breeding habitat for this bird in the parish, although it is still found in some of the ancient woodlands of the county and at places such as Little Paxton pits near St Neots. The Wryneck, a member of the woodpecker family, has undergone a dramatic decline in the 20th century to become only a scarce passage migrant in Britain, seen in spring and autumn. Formerly breeding, it would certainly have been commoner in Walker's day and the presence of old orchard trees may have helped as it used to nest in tree holes. Occasional Red-backed Shrikes were also present in the hedgerows of Dry Drayton within living memory, but this bird has also been lost as a breeding species in this country since the late 1980s.

The birdlife of the parish may be divided into those species which are resident all year round, many of which are our common garden birds, and those species which visit us either during the winter or summer seasons. In addition, there are some birds which just pass through the parish on passage, or are simply 'accidentals' - lucky sightings which make up the extra excitement of bird observation. A full list of the birds recorded in Dry Drayton over the period 1990-2000 can be found in the Appendix.

### ***Resident birds***

Although we take many of our resident birds for granted, a number of these are no longer as common as they once were. Indeed the status of some of them is now of serious concern. The reasons for this are not always apparent, but may include changes in the wider countryside affecting food availability or nesting habitat, or more subtle changes such as climatic ones.

**Blackbirds** seem to be as numerous as ever in our gardens, but this is a false impression because the species has been listed as of conservation concern. There has been a significant decrease in the Blackbird populations of woodland and farmland and the greater numbers coming into gardens may indicate a general shortage of resources in the countryside for them. Certainly Blackbird nest predation by Weasels, Magpies and Jays is less in gardens than in natural woodland. However, starvation of entire Blackbird broods is more than twice as frequent in gardens, the nestlings often succumbing in warm, dry weather when earthworms are almost impossible to extract from lawns. The **Song Thrush** has become an even greater worry, being listed as 'High Alert' by the British Trust for Ornithology. The species has declined by more than half since the 1970s and is currently the subject of a great deal of ornithological research into the causes for its decline. Being smaller and slimmer than the Blackbird, the Song Thrush loses out on competition for food in the garden, often being chased away by the larger species. Snails are an important part of its diet, which are not exploited successfully by other birds and in gardens with healthy snail populations, Song Thrushes seem to fare better.

We have another resident thrush species in Dry Drayton - the larger **Mistle Thrush**, or Stormcock, so-called because of its readiness to sing from a high vantage point even in heavy rain. This tends to frequent gardens less than the Song Thrush, preferring more open countryside and can also be distinguished from this species by its sandy-grey back and larger,

bolder, more rounded breast spots. Mistle Thrushes tend to start breeding two or three weeks earlier than Song Thrushes, nest building beginning in February. These are built high up in a tree fork and can be very well hidden. The name Mistle is linked to Mistletoe, possibly the sparse distribution of the bird being linked to that of the berry, the seeds of which are spread by the thrush when it wipes its beak on tree bark after eating the rather glutinous fruit. Our other thrush species are the winter visiting Redwing and Fieldfare (see 'Seasonal visitors').

Our village gardens are ideal places to observe the antics of the tit family - mostly **Blue Tits** and **Great Tits**, with occasional visiting parties of **Long-tailed Tits**. Fortunately the populations of Blue and Great Tits seem quite stable for the moment and these birds are helped by the availability of food put out for them in winter. Even the normally insect-feeding Long-tailed Tits have taken to the peanut feeder in recent years. **Coal Tits** are not often seen here, being more timid than the other species. They are more at home in coniferous woods. With their relatively slender beaks they can extract food more easily than the other species from clusters of pine needles. We also have one record of a **Marsh Tit** at a garden feeder.

**Starling** flocks are a prominent feature in autumn and winter, often descending in large numbers on to our lawns, especially if scraps are left out. *"15 starlings, 1 blackbird on lawn morning of April 4th. 9 starlings on lawn morning of 5th...There are constantly some birds feeding on the lawn, but the starlings outnumber blackbirds or thrushes"* (Walker). Starlings have also learned to tackle the peanuts in feeders, flapping noisily and squawking to their companions and preventing smaller birds from gaining access to the food. They are a very sociable species, both feeding and roosting in large numbers, although even these are becoming less common a sight in towns and cities than formerly. In late summer, feeding strategies centre on grasslands, the adults probing the ground busily for insect larvae. Being hole nesters, more Starling nestlings fledge successfully than those species having open nests which are thus more susceptible to predators.

Finches are represented most commonly here by the Greenfinch and Chaffinch and less often by Goldfinch, Siskin, Bullfinch and Linnet. **Greenfinches** are almost addicted to the black sunflower seeds put out as a popular bird food in winter. Although they seem to be present all year round in gardens, the actual birds may not be the same individuals, since Greenfinches do migrate, albeit not far. Ringing studies have shown that some birds move southwest in Britain in winter, while Greenfinches from Norway visit the east coast. Modern intensive farming has made life harder for the Greenfinch, especially the mowing of hedges which removes so many of the berries and seeds which form part of the birds' natural diet. Greenfinches are very fond of wild rose hips, for example, and their powerful beaks enable them to break open tough seed cases that many other birds cannot utilise. **Chaffinches** have subtly different behaviour to other finches, being ground feeders and not clinging to vegetation or feeders like Greenfinches. They are also relatively silent when feeding, in contrast to the constant twittering of feeding flocks of Greenfinches or Goldfinches. Leaving the seed heads of plants such as Teasel or thistles through winter will more or less guarantee **Goldfinches** will visit at some time. Their exotic appearance, with red, white and black striped heads and flashing yellow wing bars made them victims of the cage bird trade in the 19th century, when large numbers were trapped and sold as pets. The nesting behaviour of the Goldfinch has been recorded in meticulous detail by Peter Conder, a former president of the RSPB. This was especially remarkable since it was done while he was in a prisoner of war camp in 1943, spending nine hours a day watching three Goldfinch nests. His observations were recorded in a scientific paper published after the war.

**Bullfinches** would have been more numerous in the days when orchards were a feature of the parish, since these birds are a serious pest on fruit buds. They are rather elusive birds, despite the brilliant colours of the male, as they spend a great deal of time in the deep cover of thickets and woods. Just occasionally they make a bold appearance in our gardens, often in pairs. The female lacks the bright rosy-orange breast of the male, but the clear white rump and black caps stand out well on both sexes. **Siskins** are very infrequent visitors to nut feeders and conifer trees in winter, although they are beginning to show a tendency to stay longer into the breeding season in some parts of the country. They can be distinguished from Greenfinches by their smaller size, black on the wings and streaking elsewhere and greater agility when feeding.

So much a part of the rural and urban scene since time immemorial, it is worrying to learn that numbers of the humble **House Sparrow**, long regarded as a pest by farmers, are also now on the wane. In London, the bird's decline has even prompted questions in the House of Lords. Several census results have shown a decrease of up to 85% in House Sparrow numbers during the period 1925-1995. There have been several theories to account for this, the most popular one being a decrease in food availability at the crucial time for rearing nestlings during the first few days of their life. Reductions in the variety of farmland crops, with weed-free yields, cutting of grass for silage before it has set seed, ploughing up of headlands to increase the amount of land under cultivation and increased use of selective herbicides and pesticides have all reduced the seed supply for both House and Tree Sparrows. We still have House Sparrows in our village gardens, but they are much less frequent out in the fields now.

In contrast, one bird that is still with us in very healthy numbers and also cast in the role of villain is the **Wood Pigeon**. Large flocks are very much a part of the year round scene throughout the farmland of the parish, as elsewhere in the country, congregating in the fields despite gas scarers or modern scarecrows. Just about every large tree in the village also harbours numbers of fat pigeons sitting in its branches at some part of the day. *"Twenty or thirty wood pigeons in the orchard, and on the tops of the kitchen garden wall waiting to devour the young broccoli plants at early dawn, April 20th 1877"* (Walker). They come down into our gardens and strut round with a kind of idiotic supremacy, gorging themselves on scraps left out for other birds and drinking in water from bird baths or ponds with frightening efficiency, not even having to lift their heads to swallow, like songbirds. Even odder is the fact that pigeons are not dependent on supplies of insect food or caterpillars to feed their young, since they secrete a kind of protein-rich milk from their crops for this purpose. Either comic or scourge depending on people's viewpoint, it is nevertheless important that we continue to monitor Wood Pigeon numbers, both for economic and environmental reasons. The pinky-grey **Collared Doves** are also a phenomenal success story in terms of their colonisation of Britain. Unknown here before the early 1950s, these birds have shown a meteoric explosion in numbers and they are now found in gardens and around grain stores everywhere, sometimes in large groups. Part of their success is due to their long breeding season (March to October) and a probable genetic change causing their spread north-westwards from their former European mainland strongholds. Only time will tell whether they continue to remain around habitation and gardens, or move out more into the wider countryside. One thing for certain is that their migration urge to move north-westwards, if continued unchecked, will put them at a distinct survival disadvantage over the Atlantic Ocean !

Many birds occupy affectionate places in our personal and national consciousness, and as a family, the owls must be near the top of this list. We have records for three of our owl species in Dry Drayton : Barn Owl, Tawny Owl and Little Owl. **Barn Owls** were formerly more frequent when large, slightly dilapidated wooden barns were a feature of our rural landscape. These have long since been tidied away, removing an essential supply of nesting habitat for Barn Owls. But the story is not always that simple and other factors affecting food supply of voles and mice, road kills and competition with the more aggressive and adaptable Tawny Owl may also be other important underlying reasons for the virtual disappearance of the Barn Owl here. It is now seen very rarely, hunting at night along verges, or flying across roads like a white ghost caught in car headlights. *"Strix flammea, Barn door owl on the evening of March 8th 1877 flying across the Scotland Lane - seen again by gardener on the evening of March 22nd..."* wrote Walker. I wonder just how frequent sightings of this beautiful bird were in his day.

**Tawny Owls** have been sighted regularly in the garden of the Coach House on many occasions, possibly roosting in a nearby oak tree. They presumably breed locally as young birds are often seen or heard in this area. One in an ivy-covered tree in Pettitts Lane was being mobbed by a host of small birds early one evening on one occasion. The owls' spooky calls may also sometimes be heard at the still of night in the winter months from November. Usually taking small mammal prey, many people do not realise that Tawny Owls also take earthworms from our lawns at night. As top predator in the food chain, the continuing presence of owls, such as Tawnies, are a reassuring sight as they indicate the well-being of the natural ecosystem. We

are very fortunate also to have had breeding **Little Owls** in the village in recent years and the rough grassland with old sheds near the church has been a favoured haunt for this small yellow-eyed hunter on summer evenings. They are also active during the daytime. These birds nest in holes in trees and the old broken willows on the site of the former reservoir are probably perfect for this purpose. The eggs are laid in April or May, with a typical clutch numbering three to five eggs. At first the young owls are covered with short white down, but as they grow, their speckled grey-brown adult plumage soon begins to show through underneath the down. It was a charming sight to see three young owls sitting out on a slanted willow bough and taking their first flights under the watchful gaze of their parents. Britain's present Little Owls are descended from birds brought over from Holland in the late 19th century, although fossil records show that the bird was a former British resident in prehistoric times before dying out.

Less popular in many people's eyes, especially farmers, are members of the corvid, or Crow family, but these birds demonstrate a social cohesion in several of their species and they are a very successful group as a whole. **Carrion crows** are frequently seen 'cawing' from tree tops or as small groups in the open fields. They are one of our most adaptable birds, feeding on a wide range of foods, from grain in winter and various insect foods in summer, to scavenging rubbish dumps and carrion, including road kills. We have even had a record of the grey and black **Hooded Crow** on the edge of our parish, a very rare visitor to this part of the country since its strongholds are in NW Scotland and Ireland. It is closely related to the Carrion Crow and even interbreeds with it where the two birds' ranges overlap.

There is a small rookery behind the pub in the village, of about nine or so nests, and in spring the **Rooks** can be seen wheeling around calling raucously and adding fresh sticks to their old nests from the previous season. There was a rookery in Walker's time in the old elms of the back shrubbery of the Rectory and another in the avenue at the farm, in the vicinity of the church, this being the larger of the two. Rooks are very sociable birds and can easily be told apart from crows by their gathering in larger parties, as at their rookeries or when foraging in fields. The bald patch at the base of their beaks and a different call also distinguishes them from the larger crows. Successful breeding pairs of rooks stay together for several years, often for life, and the male bird is a dedicated provider, feeding not just the incubating female but the entire family before the chicks fledge and can forage for themselves. An amusing rural vignette involving a rook in Dry Drayton was noted by Walker : "*A rook (March 27th, 1877) flew off with an old man's (Glover's) dinner, consisting of bread and cheese wrapped in a handkerchief, while he was binding wood in faggots by the brook. On being frightened by the cart returning for a fresh load, the bird dropped it in the brook*". **Jackdaws** are also gregarious and sociable members of the crow family, but are smaller than Rooks. They have grey napes and their resonant calls often pick them out as they fly overhead and tumble in acrobatic flocks across the village skies. They are at home in some of the larger old gardens but are probably also commoner than is realised in smaller gardens, often sneaking in before dawn to take food left out for other birds. They gather together to feed and roost in flocks outside the breeding season. Work by ecologists has shown that though Jackdaws work hard, they often cannot find enough food to ensure survival of all their brood. Only a single brood is attempted each year, and if this fails they do not try again.

Another intelligent and versatile crow is the **Magpie**, whose numbers have increased considerably in recent years. This has led to a great deal of anger and resentment by people who have attributed the decline in our songbird numbers to increased predation of their eggs and nestlings by Magpies. Detailed research into this problem is under way by the British Trust for Ornithology. For the declining Song Thrush, it has been shown that their breeding fortunes have not really changed during the time that Magpie numbers have been increasing. Neither has the number of thrush fledglings leaving the nest changed sufficiently across the country to account for the observed drop in adult thrush numbers. Increases in Magpie numbers should have occurred in the same places and over the same time that their prey species have declined, but no such correlations have been detected so far. Thus, so far, the increase in Magpie numbers and the fall in Song Thrush numbers do not appear to be linked, although work is continuing to assess trends over much longer time periods. **Jays** are the other crow species that are seen around Dry Drayton, although they are not as common as the other

species. I have seen a pair burying acorns in the grass verge near (appropriately) Oak Crescent. Single birds visit gardens from time to time, and three Jays graced a garden in the High Street on one occasion. Jays are known to be vital vectors in the development of new oaks; they even have an enlarged oesophagus, lubricated by copious saliva, for the purpose of transporting many acorns. Each autumn a single Jay can collect and hoard as many as 2000 acorns, burying them in the ground where they are safe from other predators such as mice. Many acorns are later retrieved by the Jays, but a number are forgotten and these germinate into tree seedlings. Apart from the Song Thrush, the Jay is the only other garden bird that eats significant numbers of snails.

Water birds are not typically associated with Dry Drayton, but we have several **Moorhens** (or Water Hens) on ponds in the parish, such as at Duck End Farm, the old pond in the Coach House garden and the pond on the slip road from the A14. These birds have even bred in some years. Moorhens were also familiar in Walker's day : *"The water hens that had disappeared from the pond at the bottom of the lawn for a great many days returned there during the fourth week in May". "December 24th (1879) ... Water hen running about on the frost covered lawn"*. **Coots** are also resident on the large pond at Duck End Farm and a **Grey Heron** is a regular visitor early morning there, feasting on the copious quantities of small ornamental fish. Herons are sometimes seen winging their way over the village, their large curved wings beating slowly, their head snaked back against their breast, seemingly unhurried. **Mallards** are frequent on the larger ponds, including once a maximum of 17 birds in the Coach House garden.

The **Pheasant** is really an intruder in our countryside, for it is not a native of the British Isles, coming from Asia. It was introduced here many years ago and is now accepted as a British bird. Pheasants have increased everywhere in the British countryside due to the intensive game-rearing of their chicks in many woodlands for sport. The cock birds are now a colourful and exotic addition to the local countryside and are coming regularly to feed in village gardens, especially during the winter months. Feeding out in the open, they nevertheless need nearby shelter to retreat into when threatened, preferring to run for cover. Sometimes they take off vertically with a noisy explosion of wingbeats. They rarely fly far when disturbed and never very high above the ground. The birds thus have limited powers of dispersal, and infrequently move more than about six miles from their place of birth during their lives. The female is much less conspicuous than the male, relying on her camouflaged plumage to remain concealed whilst incubating the 8-15 olive-green eggs in a simple unlined depression on the ground in dense vegetation. Pheasant chicks are born downy and are capable of feeding themselves from birth. Living for the first few days on a store of yolk within their bodies, they later graduate to feeding mainly on animal food, especially spiders, and then move more to plant foods during the second week of life, beginning with green food and later seeds, so that by the time they are adults their diet consists entirely of vegetable matter gleaned from the ground. Wrote Walker : *"Two or three pheasants' nests occurred on the glebe in 1876, one in the 8 acre, one in the larch planting and one near the Edinburgh Farm. Out of the 12 eggs in the one in the 8 acre, 5 were hatched under a hen in the village and subsequently kept in a coop in the orchard and supplied with ants' eggs, maggots, etc, but only two were reared, as three were drowned in a thunderstorm"*.

The native Grey (or English) Partridge was formerly very common throughout the British countryside. Certainly Walker knew the bird well : *"August 12th (1877). Found a partridge's nest with five eggs in the ditch side leading up from the New Farm towards Childerley. Birds common in the glebe this season"*. It has now disappeared from many of its old haunts as a result of decreased chick survival (less than 30% currently). This is thought to be the result of the use of herbicides in cereals diminishing the availability of insect food on which the chicks depend. Extensive research by the Game Conservancy has shown that chick survival rates can be restored to more viable levels by the use of unsprayed conservation 'headlands' round arable field margins. Unfortunately I know of no recent records of this bird for our parish. By contrast, the introduced **French** or **Red-legged Partridge** is now common in the fields round the village. Whole coveys can be flushed by walkers, the birds with their distinctively marked faces and striped flanks scurrying away into shelter, sometimes seemingly from under our feet !

Two highly distinctive and regular village garden visitors are the **Green Woodpecker** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. The laughing call of the Green Woodpecker, which gives the bird its alternative name of 'yaffle', can often be heard before the bird is seen. It is generally seen feeding on ants or other invertebrates in lawns or old grassland. The Great Spotted Woodpecker, with its black and white plumage and patches of red, is a common visitor to hanging peanut feeders. Both birds are very wary of humans, however, and take flight at the slightest disturbance. We also have one or two records of the much rarer **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** for the village, but unlike the other two woodpeckers, which are resident, this bird is at best a very infrequent visitor.

One of the greatest bird of prey recoveries in Britain has been that of the **Sparrowhawk**. Dashing through village gardens at very low level to surprise its prey - that of smaller birds - Sparrowhawks are finally returning to their natural population levels after suffering persecution from gamekeepers and then pesticide poisoning in the 1950s. From now on, as top of the food chain predators, Sparrowhawk fortunes will depend very much on songbird availability and it is therefore worrying that populations of some of our once common garden songbirds are in decline. Another hazard facing Sparrowhawks today is collision with plate glass windows in houses while in high speed pursuit of their prey.

A bird more of the open fields and road verges is the **Kestrel**, hovering on the lookout for small mammals. This is our most common and widespread bird of prey. Its success is due to its adaptation to the man-made environment as well as its very catholic diet, which comprises not just mice and voles, but also grasshoppers and beetles and occasionally small birds such as finches. It is an exceptionally keen-eyed hunter, particularly as it may hover at heights of up to 60 m (200 feet) above the ground. As it hovers, it keeps its head absolutely still - eyes fixed on the potential prey far below - while maintaining its position, even in strong winds, by constant small adjustments of wings and tail. Its mastery of the air is thus supreme.

### **Seasonal visitors**

The winter and summer seasons bring their associated regular bird visitors to the village, while some less common birds pass through on spring or autumn passage. Winter sometimes means cold, windy, pale blue skies streaked with cloud, when flocks of **Fieldfares** and **Redwings** fly in from Scandinavia to spend the period from October through to March with us. These two species often feed together and are very gregarious by nature, joining our resident thrushes out in the fields or stripping the berries on hedgerows. Winter also sees flocks of **Lapwings**, and just occasionally, a few **Golden Plovers** accompanying them, wheeling above the bare or freshly-greening fields, settling or shifting in brief restless motion, easily disturbed. *"April 10 (1880). The plovers wheeling round Polled Tree Field. Season cold and backward though much drier than last year. Plovers called Blue Plover here"* - Walker. Today's alternative names for Lapwings are Green Plover or Peewit, after their call. Small Lapwing flocks have been seen in the large fields south of the church and near the A14. Again, Lapwing numbers are in long-term decline, probably as a result of intensive changes in agricultural practice affecting breeding success, as well as diminution of soil invertebrates, their main food source.

Gull flocks are also more noticeable in winter. **Black-headed Gulls** tend to congregate in winter cereal fields, although their distinctive dark heads are only for the breeding season, being replaced by a dark smudge mark just behind the eye in winter. Overflying **Great** or **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** are not uncommon, usually only in ones or twos, as are **Herring Gulls** and the occasional **Common Gull**.

Our summer skies are typified by the arrival of **Swallows**, **House Martins**, **Swifts** and smaller numbers of **Sand Martins**. House Martin nests under eaves in the village are now in single figures and suitable locations for Swallows to nest (old barns and stables) are very few in number. A few pairs of breeding Swallows are still regular visitors to the stables at Duck End Farm. The twittering, slaty blue-backed, fork-tailed parents dash out over the heads of the horses in search of insect prey for their young chicks, safely ensconced in their woven grass

and straw nests up in the rafters. The small dark scimitar bodies of the Swifts weave invisible network trails across the sky, in virtually constant flight throughout their lives except for breeding and nesting, sieving the rich aerial plankton of insects - midges, mosquitoes and flies.

Probably the best-known and eagerly awaited spring bird sound is that of the first call of the returning **Cuckoo**, normally around late April - "*Cuckoo first heard 1877 April 29th*"; "*April 19th (1880) the cuckoo first heard*", wrote Walker. Today, Cuckoos are not as plentiful as they once were, so the sound of the bird here is especially welcome. Its extraordinary lifestyle and habits are not always as endearing to people as its call, however, as noted by Walker : "*Cuckoo seen by the gardeners to rob a greenfinches nest in the elms of the back shrubbery, June 1st, and on being frightened, to drop the egg on the edge of the nest*". Several bird species are parasitised by the Cuckoo, including Meadow Pipit, Dunnock and Reed Warbler. Each female Cuckoo seems to belong to a host-specific genus but we do not know whether she selects a particular bird host through genetic inheritance, or by imprinting on a host while still a chick.

The delightful warblers also undertake long-distance migrations from sub-Saharan Africa to join us for the summer. In early spring the two syllable call of the **Chiffchaff**, which gives the bird its name and is surprisingly loud for such a tiny creature, sounds out strongly from a high tree top above the willow blossoms. **Willow Warblers** are virtually identical in appearance to Chiffchaffs, but fortunately have a completely different song. Later the scratchy song of the **Whitethroat** is a reasonably familiar sound from hawthorn scrub and hedgerows around the parish from spring through early summer. Numbers of these birds fluctuate from year to year. Some **Blackcaps** now over-winter with us, and this is a recently-developed habit, within the last 40 years. Improved winter weather conditions during this period may have helped, but it has been found that the Blackcaps that spend the winter in our gardens are from an entirely different population to the summer visiting Blackcaps. Other warblers that have been recorded for the village include **Sedge, Reed** and **Garden Warblers, Lesser Whitethroat** and, for a brief spell in late April / early May 1997, a **Grasshopper Warbler** was heard 'reeling' in the overgrown field with the old sheds near the church.

**Spotted Flycatchers** arrive here late in spring. Present only as one or two individuals, they are inconspicuous little birds, with a dusky brown plumage and an upright posture when perched. They characteristically flutter out briefly from these perches after their insect prey. Pairs have been known from some of the larger, older village gardens and also from the land behind the Black Horse, but sightings do not occur every year.

Finally, two summer visiting birds that must receive mention, on account of their handsome appearances, are the **Yellow Wagtail** and **Hobby**. The striking yellow underparts and olive-yellow back of the flickering, long-tailed Yellow Wagtail is unmistakable once seen. This bird winters in West Africa and seems to be developing a liking for breeding in cereal fields here. Formerly more commonly associated with wet pastures, I have watched several of these beautiful birds fluttering briefly above the ripening wheat at Scotland Farm, as well as in other places in the county. The dashing, sharp-winged Hobby comes to us from South Africa and is extending its range northwards in Britain at the moment. Although largely insectivorous for much of the year (it is adept at catching large dragonflies on the wing), the Hobby switches to bird prey during the breeding season. It is welcoming to learn that the sight of this small falcon darting across our village skies, sometimes chasing and scattering Swallows on a warm May evening, has become another recent natural success story.

