

Do Yellowhammers eat bees?

Wendy Carter



01. Yellowhammer catching bees? Broadway 11.05.2019. Wendy Carter.

The Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* is a familiar bird in the Worcestershire countryside. The adults feed mostly on seeds (especially cereal grains) throughout the year but their chicks depend on invertebrates as food (RSPB).

In the spring issue of Worcestershire Wildlife Trust's membership magazine, a photograph that I'd taken of a Yellowhammer amongst hawthorn blossom was used to illustrate a news article. In the photo is a solitary bee in mid-flight - other than being reasonably impressed that I'd managed to capture both the bird and the bee in focus (although the bee was too small to be identifiable), I'd filed the photograph away without too much thought. That was until Gary Farmer dropped me an email asking what I knew about Yellowhammers hunting for bees. I assumed that he thought the bird was hunting the bee captured in flight but Gary's eagle eyes had spotted an insect in the Yellowhammer's beak - something I'd completely overlooked.



02. Close up of Yellowhammer and unidentified insect. Broadway 11.05.2019. Wendy Carter

I'll admit it. Identifying an insect that is caught in the beak of a bird when the bird is in a tree and the photo is taken from some distance

is somewhat challenging. Both Gary and I have zoomed in on the photo and pondered over the Yellowhammer's meal. It seems to have wings longer than the abdomen and possibly has swollen thighs? Not very bee-like so could it be a hoverfly *Syritta pipiens* perhaps, or even a small beetle with wings extended?

It is known that Yellowhammers eat invertebrates but none of the literature I've read refers to them hunting for such in blossom or elsewhere. Research carried out by DEFRA suggests that they will take a small number of unspecified fly species.

So here's a request to watch your local Yellowhammers more closely. Do they actively hunt flying insects such as bees or do they happen upon tasty morsels, almost as a by-catch, whilst otherwise seeking seeds, buds, blossom etc? Dare we ask the question "what do Yellowhammers eat?"

References

RSPB Available at: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/farming/advice/helping-species/yellowhammer/> [Accessed 29.04.22]
 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Research Projects. *Scoping study to investigate the development of a chick food index - PS2358*. Available at: <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=16999> [Accessed 29.04.22]
 Annex 2 of above report. Available at: http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Document.aspx?Document=PS2358_9465_FRA.pdf [Accessed 29.04.22]

Images

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Editor's note on Do Yellowhammers eat bees?

Yellowhammers are primarily seed eaters although a wide variety of insects are included in their diet (BWP) at various times of the year. Nestlings are fed on insects and nest failure is more frequent if there is a lack of insects (Stoate et al 1998). Entomologists consider hawthorn blossom to be very attractive to insects but this is not so every year or in every locality. A pass with a sweep net through the

flowers can produce many insects or none. Charles Elton in his book *The pattern of animal communities* (1966) notes that in some years hawthorn flower produce large amounts of nectar and visiting insects are abundant. These can include honey bees that produce a remarkably good honey from that source.

Wendy's paper set me thinking about these things. So far I have not found reference to Yellowhammers (or other birds) foraging at the start of their nesting season in May for insects amongst hawthorn blossom. Have you? A challenge! Look out for it in 2023 and make records both negative and positive. And then write a note (or more) for *Worcestershire Record*. Harry Green.

References

- BWP. Perrins, C. M. Senior editor 1994. *The birds of the Western Palearctic*. Volume 9. *Emberiza citronella* Yellowhammer: Food, pages 158-159. Oxford University Press.
- Elton, C. 1966. *The pattern of animal communities*. Methuen, London.
- Stoate, C., Moreby, S. J. & Szczur, J. 1998. Breeding ecology of farmland Yellowhammers *Emberiza citronella*. *Bird Study* 45:109-120.