

The History of the Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* in Worcestershire

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It is now many years since the Cirl Bunting last bred in Worcestershire, and the 40th anniversary of the last reported attempt would seem to be an appropriate time to give some details of its former status and distribution in the county. To modern generations of birdwatchers the Cirl Bunting is known as a nationally rare bird at present restricted to a narrow coastal strip in south Devon, where the recent implementation of various agri-environment schemes has resulted in a remarkable recovery in the population (Stanbury *et al.* 2010). But there are just a few of Worcestershire's older birdwatchers who have fond memories of the bird as a declining species half a century ago, at which time it was confined to a few places in the south-west of the county.



01. Cirl bunting. © Chris Gomersall

The Cirl Bunting was first discovered by George Montagu in South Devon in 1800, after which time it appears the species underwent a major expansion of range. In 1891 Alpin conducted an enquiry into its national status (Alpin, 1892) and by the end of the nineteenth century, when numbers appear to have been at their peak, the bird had been recorded in some 39 counties across southern England, along the Severn and Wye Valleys and parts of Wales as far north as Denbighshire (Holloway, 1996), being reported by contemporary authors as extremely local in some areas while quite common in others.

However, it seems a decline had probably started during the 1930s, and in the early post-war period there was strong evidence of this decline, and by the time of the first *Breeding Bird Atlas* (Sharrock, 1976) it was known in less than 20 counties, and during the first British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) national survey in 1982 a total of 167 pairs were reported from only six counties (Sitters, 1985). By 1989 only 118 pairs were found in just three counties, with over 96% of the population concentrated in south Devon (Evans, 1992). Undoubtedly, post-war changes in farming methods had been the main cause for this rapid reduction in the population. In the early part of this period cereal crops had been planted in the spring and, following harvesting, many stubbles remained throughout the following winter. Evans (Evans, 1997) found over-winter stubble, with a rich variety of arable weeds, was the most favoured habitat outside the breeding season. In the second half of the 20th Century this had become an increasingly rare feature of the countryside as there had been a steady change to autumn sown crops. Such changes in land use also took place in Worcestershire during this period, these being well documented by Evans (2014) and no doubt this

would have had a detrimental effect on many species found of arable land including Cirl Buntings.

From information contained in the main publications (Harthan, 1946; Harthan, 1961; Harrison *et al.* 1982; Harrison & Harrison, 2005) from personal records, and records, reports and comments from other sources, including the *West Midland Bird Club Annual Reports*, the *Transactions of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club* and the Annual Reports of the *Malvern Field Club*, it is possible to gain some idea of the status and distribution of the Cirl Bunting in Worcestershire over the last century and a half.

Following its discovery in Devon in 1800 it appears to have taken little time for the Cirl Bunting to reach Worcestershire. It was first described as being of 'infrequent occurrence' (Hastings, 1834) and in a paper on Worcestershire Birds of 1833, C.L.E Perrott lists Cirl Bunting as having occurred at Throckmorton. Then, in 1848 it was seen at Worcester, where several years later a bird-preserved told Edwin Lees he had shot one on Helbury Hill in 1855 (Lees' notes in Worcester Museum). Around this time came the first records from the Malvern district where Lees reported the bird from the Hereford side of the Worcester Beacon and Malvern Link. It was also seen at Northfield on the outskirts of Birmingham in 1888.

The first record in the 20th Century came from Old Hills in July 1900, but the first detailed record was by Tomes (1901) who stated 'The cirl bunting is not a rare though a very local bird in Worcestershire ... the favoured locality being in the clay districts rather than in the alluvial and sandy ones'. During this first decade of the century N.G. Hadden, reporting on birds in south Worcestershire, commented '...seems to be extending its range, and usually to be seen in pairs in early spring throughout the district. In severe weather they visit the rickyards with the finches'.

From the limited information known from the time it would seem that during the first decades of the 20th Century the Cirl Bunting was at least widespread and increasing in the south of the county, but it was not confined to these districts. I have a diary originally belonging to J. Steele-Elliott, who lived at Dowles Manor in the Wyre Forest, in which he records a Cirl Bunting singing near Dowles Church in March and April 1908. A few years earlier he had been able to locate probably three pairs in the locality (Steele-Elliott, J. 1904), where it continued to be recorded up to at least 1917

From the same district, in 1933 T.J. Beeston reported that 'some years ago' he knew of a pair in a copse near Cookley Church, where he had found their nest, and that they had been present for several years, but had now gone. A little later in the century there is also an interesting series of records from the north-east of the county; the first in April 1935 at Alvechurch; in May 1943 Fred Fincher found a female near Bromsgrove; in November 1951 Arthur Jacobs found a pair in a mixed flock near Bittell Reservoir; in May 1958 I saw a male in a lane hedge at Cofton Hackett close to Upper Bittell; at nearby Rubery a male was seen in May 1959, and in 1960 one was seen again at Bittell during March. With four of these records in spring, the possibility that birds may have been breeding in the district during this decade cannot be entirely ruled out, although during the subsequent few years neither I nor anyone else reported any. In contrast the only record from the south-east was from Sheriffs Lench where Harthan saw a male in December 1933.

Undoubtedly the most interesting and detailed account from the early part of the century was that of C.W. Bannister. Although a keen ornithologist he is perhaps better known as a botanist who specialised in aliens, and spent much time recording wool-aliens at Tewkesbury Flour Mills and Gloucester Docks. In 1940 he gave details of the successful breeding of a pair Cirl Buntings at Holdfast near Upton-upon-Severn in 1936 and 1938. He observed that after the breeding season they resorted to stubble fields and wandered about a good deal mingling with other Buntings and Finches. In January 1936 he came across a party of about 20 at Bushley near Tewkesbury, the only record of a flock.

Elsewhere, in the district to the north of Malvern Hills, two singing birds were reported from Suckley in 1911 and two at Long Green in 1932. However, it appears the main concentration of birds occurred around Malvern itself, where it was thought to have been fairly common until about 1910. In the period 1950-1970, apart from a few scattered sites elsewhere in the south-west, virtually all the records came from this district, mainly along the sheltered eastern side of the Hills and in the district immediately to the east. Harthan (1946) mentions the Cirl Bunting being fond of pasture land with plenty of hedgerow timber, which at that time would have included many tall Elms, whereas Bannister (1940) noted that it also had a noticeable preference for the outskirts of towns and villages and was most often found near houses. Many of the locations around Malvern were close to habitation, where small numbers were reported from a number of places, including Welland, Malvern Wells, Wells Quarry, Pickersleigh, Castlemorton and the borders of gardens in Malvern and Hall Green. But by 1971, apart from a report of one singing near Leigh Sinton, birds were restricted to quarries at Lower Wyche. When I visited this site that year birds were present on the cliff-face above the lake in Earnslaw Quarry and in a nearby smaller quarry (now a carpark), opposite which a male sang frequently from a large roadside Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*. The last records for Malvern were from this site in the following year. Also in 1971 Fred Fincher had found a singing bird in a field hedge on the north side of Longdon Marsh, this being the last record from south Worcestershire. In 1976 he took me to the precise spot, and although we spent sometime in the vicinity there appeared to be no birds present.

Coincidentally, at the time the species appeared to be on the brink of extinction in the county, one visited a bird table in a garden at Hallow in 1971. In the following year one was seen in winter on the opposite side of the River Severn at Northwick Marsh, and in May another was singing in June at nearby Sinton Green. There had been no further reports from this district during the following few years, when in 1977 I received a call from Harry Green who suggested I might like to get in touch with the vicar at Hallow who claimed to have had a male Cirl Bunting regularly visiting the vicarage garden bird table. I duly called on the vicar and his wife, and although no birds were present in the garden during my visit, I gathered they had been regular visitors during the previous five years, had been heard singing on regular occasions, and a pair had been suspected of possibly breeding close by, although this had not been confirmed. After I left the vicarage I wandered around the immediate area for a while and eventually visited a small, much overgrown and long-disused churchyard. To my surprise after a few minutes I saw a male bird emerge from thick vegetation covering one of the old graves and hop onto the lower branch of a small tree, before quickly disappearing. On a subsequent visit to Hallow in late June I spent a few hours recording plants in a water meadow which lay between the churchyard and river. While I was there the male bird sang regularly from a tree in the grounds of a neighbouring building which was, I believe at the time, a Dr. Barnardo's home and where a week later I saw a pair together, feeding on one of the paths.

During this time Victor Lewis, a well known bird song recordist of the time, spent some sixty hours on the site, and although he was never able to locate the precise whereabouts of the nest, in early July he did manage to observe fledglings being attended by both parents in the churchyard. One can only speculate as to where these birds dispersed to later in the year, and it is very surprising that no birds were seen again in the immediate area. During the following years there were no further reports and it was generally assumed that the Cirl Bunting had probably become extinct in the county; only for a female bird to turn up in 1983 with Yellowhammers and Corn Buntings feeding on spilt grain outside a grainstore near Shenstone, the last county record.

Whilst it is impossible to know if all the old records are reliable, at least those contained in the Annual Reports from the 1930s onwards had been accepted by the West Midland Bird Club. Precisely how common and widespread the species had been in the county, even

during the post-war period, will never be known. The only known survey is of a concerted effort by the Research Committee of the West Midland Bird Club in the south-west of the county on a single day in May 1957, which resulted in just a single bird being located at Malvern. But as annual bird reports will testify, there were too few recorders, and I know for a fact that the majority of these lacked motor transport, such that the more remote rural districts were rarely visited.

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Image

01. Cirl bunting. Chris Gomersall