

Gains and losses amongst Worcestershire's breeding birds 1940-2020

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Worcestershire forms part of the West Midlands Bird Club (WMBC) area along with Staffordshire, Warwickshire and the West Midlands. The Club has collected sightings submitted by generations of citizen scientists via the county recorders, creating an invaluable, detailed archive of our avifauna's fortunes since 1934. The Coronavirus lockdown gave an opportunity to indulge in some historical research and I compiled a summary of the breeding species that Worcestershire has either lost or gained up to the latest annual report for 2020. Obviously the complete list of species recorded in any season is much longer and includes a Great Bustard last seen in 1825! In 2020 the county total stood at 310 excluding subspecies and races as well as possible escapees from collections and aviaries. Out of these, somewhere in the region of 120 are breeding birds. As it took several years after the inception for reasonably consistent

reports to come from the participating counties, I have used records from 1940 onwards.

The very earliest WMBC reports can be eye-opening, nostalgic, or shocking depending on the reader's starting point. For example, many names or spellings were different, such as Yellow Bunting, Willow-Wren, Wood Wren and Sheld-Duck. More significantly, they recall how rare predatory birds were mercilessly targeted by landowners and gamekeepers. It seems hard to believe from a modern perspective, but the 1945 edition reports that an eagle was shot at Wannerton near Kidderminster on Christmas Day after a three week stay, and a later publication (1982) confirms the victim was a White-tailed Eagle (*Haaliaeetus albicilla*).

Worcestershire was renowned as a refuge for fast-vanishing birds such as Cirl Buntings and Marsh Warblers that have since gone, but over the past 80 years new species have colonised in response to climate and habitat changes making major changes to Worcestershire's inventory of breeding birds. I may well have overlooked some but here is a brief summary of nine we have lost and 29 we have gained in date order. Note that four "gains" have only one confirmed breeding record and none in the past decade.

LOSSES



01. A pair of Marsh Warblers photographed at their nest in Defford in 1978 by Arthur Winspear Cundall. This picture is a photograph of Arthur's original 20x16 inch black and white print photographed by Harry Green May 2023.

Marsh Warblers have been extinct in Worcestershire as breeding birds since the 1990s – see the account in this section on LOSSES.

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*

Wrynecks were seen regularly as summer migrants in the first part of the 20th century but numbers were declining. The last recorded breeding for the whole region was in 1941 in Malvern although a singing male stayed in Broadway from June to August 1990. Only passage migrants have occurred since, the latest being in 2020, also in Great Malvern.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanus collurio*

These are described as “much persecuted” in the very early reports, but they bred on the Malvern Hills, Hartlebury Common and the Devil’s Spittleful/Rifle Range heathlands until the early 1960s. The last definite breeding record was a pair feeding a young bird at St. Ann’s Well, Malvern in 1962. In Britain as a whole their range contracted into the south east until 1989, when they became extinct.

Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*

These were once regularly heard “churring” in the Wyre Forest during the breeding season. In 1960 they were present on the Devil’s Spittleful and Pensax Wood as well. They were heard again in the Forest in 1961 and 1963 but disappeared after this. National trends for both population size and range are encouraging, and it would be wonderful to see them in the county again.

Corncrake *Crex crex*

In the 1950s they were widespread in the county with Whittington Sewage Works a regular site. The last positive breeding record was in 1967 at Wick. After this, there were very occasional reports of passage birds, with the last in 1988 at Offenham where a bird called for two days in May.

Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirius*

The history of Cirl Buntings in Worcestershire has already been comprehensively covered by Roger Maskew in *Worcestershire Record* Number 42, April 2017, so I will only reiterate that the final breeding season report came in 1977 from Hallow. The species has recently been the subject of intensive conservation and re-introduction projects in Devon and Cornwall.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*

These still occur regularly on migration, but have declined as a breeding species from most of central and south east England. Whinchats continued to breed here until 1984 at Rushwick. Two years later the last breeding attempt was at Stourvale Marsh where a male held territory in May. However, ploughing is thought to have destroyed its habitat that year.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Common Snipe are seen in most of our wetland sites, often in good numbers, during the autumn, winter and spring. Previously their

courtship “drumming” displays were seen at several sites but in 1993 Eckington was considered the only potential breeding site. The 1997 report declared them “possibly now lost as a breeding species” in Worcestershire. The same decline was happening across most lowland areas probably in response to the drainage of wet grasslands, and within the region Staffordshire now holds the only breeding pairs.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*

The sad demise of this species has been well documented and the 1987 edition of the WMBC annual report contains reviews and articles by Harry Green, Martin Kelsey, and Steve Whitehouse. Worcestershire was the last bastion for this species in central UK, following its loss in Herefordshire in the 1950s and Gloucestershire in the mid-1980s. An established UK population remained in the Avon Valley but the decline restricted the birds to a few “core sites” and these, in turn, declined sharply in the 1980s. There were small numbers of breeding records up to 1993, but only unpaired singing males thereafter. There may be several contributing factors, but it seems that this tiny, isolated population was unable to sustain itself.

Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*

This American species was introduced to UK wildfowl collections and after escapes from Slimbridge in the 1950s it became successfully established in the West Midlands. The UK population expanded into Europe where it hybridised with the endangered White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*, threatening the survival of the latter as a species and a planned extermination programme led to its extinction in Worcestershire by 2015.

Other species

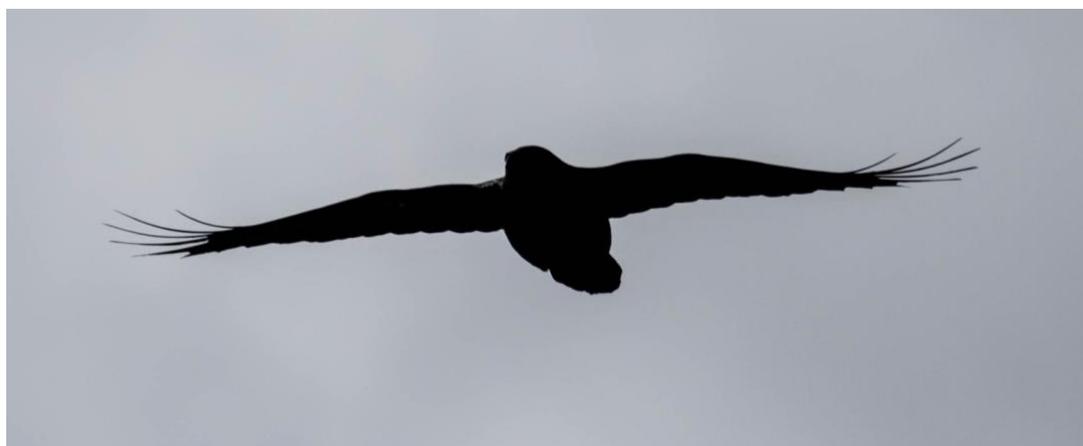
Several other species are struggling to maintain a viable breeding population and may soon join the list. For example Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*, Willow Tit *Poecile montana*, Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*, Lesser Redpoll *Acanthis cabaret*, Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* and Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*. These are all “red-listed” as “species of greatest conservation concern” in “*Birds of Conservation Concern 4*” 2015 produced by a partnership of conservation organisations and published in British Birds.

Addendum

Since the 2020 WMBC report was published two species mentioned in the “losses” section are now, sadly, considered extinct in the county, namely Willow Tit and Tree Sparrow. Thanks to the County Recorder Craig Reed for this update.

That’s the bad news, but the good news is

GAINS



02. Raven at Croome in March 2020 at Croome photographed by Dave Hull. After being extinct in Worcestershire for around 100 years there was a breeding pair in 1949. Since then they have steadily increased to between 30-40 recorded pairs. See account in the following section on GAINS.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

In issue No. 6 of *Worcestershire Record* April 1999 Richard Harbird gave a fascinating history of the Buzzard's relationship with humans throughout the ages. Persecution restricted them to western fringes of the UK in the early 20th century but a slow recovery began when the First World War called away many gamekeepers to fight. Worcestershire's first breeding record came in 1944, but hostile attitudes towards large raptors continued to threaten their range expansion. A 1954 survey found 13 proven breeding pairs plus 7–11 probable breeders. Immediately afterwards Buzzards suffered a catastrophic setback from a Myxomatosis outbreak that decimated the rabbit population and removed a key food source. This combined with the widespread effects of organochlorine poisoning reducing the population to about four pairs by 1958. Despite this, the population clung on and the next survey in 1997/8 came to the startling conclusion that the population was at the upper end of a range between 59 – 121 pairs.

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Shovelers have favoured inland wetlands as their wintering habitat, but overall remained a relatively uncommon and localised breeding species. They bred at Upton Warren in 1947, the first record of the century. After this they frequented the county's wetland sites only as a wintering duck, but fortunes changed in 2014 when a pair bred at Upton Warren Moors Pool raising 10 young. This was not a one-off and broods have been raised in subsequent years.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*

The chequered history of the Raven's relationship with humans closely matches that of the Buzzard, and by the end of the 1890s they were extinct in most of lowland England. However, they too began a slow recovery after the First World War, and the first Worcestershire Raven breeding record came in 1949, the previous being around 1859. This vanguard pair did not lead an invasion, and there were two pairs nesting the following year with the next positive breeding record at the end of the 50s from the Malvern district. Another 20 years elapsed before the next report that a pair bred in the "extreme west" of the county in 1979. Compared to Buzzards, the Ravens' recovery in Worcestershire was extremely slow and steady and yet another decade passed before the records spiked dramatically. Since 2016 I have visited as many established breeding sites as possible and other birders have supplied information on new sites. This is paying dividends and each year we edge closer to the "real" number of breeding pairs currently over 30.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

These doves expanded their range from southern Europe during the 1930s and reached Britain in the 1950s. Although a rare sight in the region, the first county breeding record was near Worcester in 1961. Now they are classified by WMBC as a "common to very common resident".

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Sparrowhawks suffered a national decline from the effects of Organochlorine pesticide poisoning but have recovered well since the early 1960s. The first nest in Worcestershire was recorded near Ripple in 1962 and a breeding attempt occurred in 1976. It is now described as a "fairly common resident" and breeds widely in the county.

Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Hobbies nested in the county in the 1930s but then became scarce with only occasional fly-over sightings. A gradual range expansion resulted in a Worcestershire breeding record at an undisclosed site in 1965 where three young were fledged - "the first definite record for many years".

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

This duck's history is difficult to decipher from the reports, but the first breeding record I could find was at Westwood in 1967. It has long been a winter visitor but continues to breed in small numbers.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

The first British breeding record was in 1938, and the availability of sand and gravel pits was a key factor in their range and population expansion. The first county breeding record was in 1970 at Bittell. It is now a well-established summer resident at wetland reserves.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

These also bred for the first time in 1970, at Wilden although they were already established elsewhere in the region. It remains a common winter visitor and passage migrant at several lakes, but Upton Warren holds the largest breeding colony.

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

The location of Goshawks is usually shrouded in secrecy to protect them against the historical persecution that contributed to their extinction in Britain by the end of the 19th century. During the 1960s and 70s some birds were reintroduced by falconers or escaped and breeding records began to appear. In the Wyre Forest, the first birds to breed in 1973 were both presumed escapees. The latest reports confirm that Worcestershire holds a small resident population, mainly in the west.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Shelducks have expanded their range to use inland breeding sites. Upton Warren was the first county site to record successful nesting in 1978 when three young were raised. Other wetlands now host breeding pairs and Shelducks are recorded in every month of the year.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

These gulls expanded their winter range from the 1950s and were a familiar site at rubbish tips and roosts on open water. The breeding distribution also expanded as they adapted to use buildings and roof tops for nesting, and they are now the most abundant summer gull in inland town centres, making them unpopular with many human residents. The first breeding record for the region came from Worcester where two pairs bred in 1982. This is described in issue 15 of *Worcestershire Record* November 2003 where Peter Rock details the status of roof-nesting gulls in Worcester.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

The breeding range for this handsome duck has extended from its source in East Anglia. In Worcestershire it was mainly seen in the winter, with some remaining during the breeding season in the 1970s. However, the first confirmed breeding waited until 1986 at Croome and Larford, with Upton Warren a year later. Camp Lane Pits in Grimley is now an important site for Gadwall throughout the year.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*

Worcestershire sits on the eastern flank of the Goosander's English breeding range, but it is much more widespread in winter. Sightings in the summer came mainly from the River Teme but in 1994 came the first confirmed record of a pair with 11 young. This trend has continued but it remains a scarce breeding species in the county.

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

During the last century Cetti's Warblers expanded their range from southern France and arrived in south-east England. The first breeding record was in 1973 in Kent, and they spread north and west into the Midlands. Worcestershire recorded the first arrival in 1977 with sparse sightings or hearings! thereafter, but it wasn't until 1994 that breeding was confirmed when two broods were raised by two females and one male at Upton Warren. The severe winter of 2010-11 decimated the population but it has since bounced back and breeding occurs in several county locations.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

The English population of Common Terns has expanded at inland sites where nesting platforms are often provided. In Worcestershire there were summer records in the 1970s but no breeding occurred until 1994 at Upton Warren. This site remains the county's principal nesting location.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

Like Sparrowhawks, Peregrines suffered huge losses from the effects of organochlorine use but have bounced back in spectacular fashion and now exploit lowland areas and urban nesting sites. The first breeding record for Worcestershire came in 1996, but locations have routinely been withheld to protect the birds from egg collectors or other forms of persecution.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Worcestershire reflects the national changes in the range and abundance of this familiar wader. Most of the increases over recent decades in England have been at inland sites. Although recorded during summers in the 1970s, the first breeding attempt did not occur until 1993 but the nest was predated. Success first came in 1997 at Bredon's Hardwick with three young fledged. Nesting now occurs at several county sites, but in small numbers and Oystercatcher chicks are still vulnerable to predation.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Herring Gulls were well known as winter visitors, especially at rubbish tips, but breeding records came relatively recently. Two nests with eggs were seen in 1969 and 1993, but the first successful breeding record was in 1999 in Worcester. Peter Rock's article cited above for issue 15 of Worcestershire Record also refers to Herring Gulls.

Siskin *Spinus spinus*

These finches breed almost exclusively in conifer woodlands and their population has expanded in Scotland and Wales but they are scarce in most of central and eastern England. They are thought to have bred in the county during the 1930s but records ceased by 1940. During the 1980s and 90s birds were increasingly reported in breeding seasons but the first confirmed record came in 2001 from Eyemore Wood where four young were raised and breeding in the county has continued sporadically since then.

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

This elegant wader provides the logo for the RSPB and has gradually expanded its range from the Suffolk site where it first re-established itself as a breeding species in 1947. Worcestershire is fortunate to host a regular, and expanding breeding colony at Upton Warren, because it remains a predominantly eastern and south eastern English species and Wales only recorded one pair in 2010. There were occasional passage birds in the 1970s and 80s but the first pair to breed at Upton Warren arrived in April 2003. This was "a significant UK event" according to the WMBC, and is fully described in Worcestershire Record number 15 (Hodson 2003). This early success has continued and well over 20 pairs now breed at Upton Warren annually.

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

It is well known that this raptor was on the brink of extinction in the UK and confined to central Wales before a large-scale re-introduction programme took over. It is now widespread as a breeding and wintering species throughout the UK, and to a lesser extent in Ireland. It was described by the WMBC as a "probable resident" in Worcestershire in 2007, and by 2010 there were reports in every month of the year. In 2013 breeding was confirmed in one of two nests and has continued since.

Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*

There were breeding attempts in the north of the county in the 1970s and 80s but the first confirmed successful breeding was in the Teme Valley in 2015. Roger Maskew was one of the observers who monitored this event and his full account is found in Worcestershire Record No. 40, April 2016.

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyaeus melanocephalus*

European populations of these gulls have expanded and now colonise mainly coastal areas of the south and east in Britain. They first bred in Hampshire in 1968 and have been increasingly reported in Worcestershire outside the winter periods. There have been instances of hybridising with Black-headed Gulls, but the first breeding record came from Upton Warren in 2017 when two pairs raised chicks on the Flashes and Moors Pool.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

As elsewhere, numbers have increased steadily in Worcestershire in all seasons. An attempt at breeding at Arrow Valley in 2017 failed, but confirmed breeding was recorded at Upper Bittell in 2019 and 2020.

"ONE-OFF" Breeding records:**Garganey** *Anas querquedula*

Garganeys breed in small numbers right across Britain and on rare occasions in the West Midlands. They occur regularly in the county on passage but did breed "near Bromsgrove" presumably Upton Warren in 1945, a new record for the county. The region continues to record sporadic breeding and it will hopefully happen again. Some birds now overwinter in the UK.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

The first regional breeding record occurred in 1979 and they have continued ever since. In Worcestershire the first successful nesting was at Bredon's Hardwick in 1984 when a pair raised four chicks. Only passage birds have been recorded afterwards.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*

As its scientific name suggests, this gull is almost exclusively a coastal nesting species, so a Worcestershire record is highly unusual. Small numbers are seen at our wetland sites and Throckmorton in the winter months, but in 2001 a pair raised one chick at Bredon's Hardwick – the first breeding record for the region, and a noteworthy event for the whole country. There are no trends yet to suggest it will become a regular breeder.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Common Sandpipers breed in upland areas of Wales, northern England and Scotland but their range and abundance has been on a downward trend for several decades. The 1980 WMBC report noted that "the species may now be extinct as a breeding bird in the region". At the same time, a trend towards overwintering for a few individuals began. Despite this, a pair raised one or two broods alongside the River Severn near Upton in 2005. It is possible that riverside sites had been used prior to this and have been subsequently, but the county sits well outside of the favoured breeding ranges.

LOST AND FOUND

Woodlarks *Lullula arborea* had been lost to the county as a breeding species after 1961, and for a long period to the region as a whole, but made a welcome return in 2006. There is now an established population on Cannock Chase, so this may not remain an isolated event.

Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata* may also qualify to join the "arrivals" list, but being of feral origin, it only entered the official British List in 1970 and no records were available before then. It now breeds annually in Worcestershire.

FERAL SPECIES

Two other well-established feral species seen more frequently in Worcestershire and already breeding in the region are **Egyptian Goose** *Alopochen aegyptiaca* and **Rose-ringed Parakeet** *Psittacula krameri*. It is credible that they will join "the list" here in the next few years.

SUMMARY

Non-passerines +24; -4	Passerines +5; -5
Ducks Lost one by deliberate eradication - Ruddy Duck Gained six – Garganey, Shoveler, Common Pochard, Common Shelduck, Gadwall, Goosander	Doves Gained one - Collared Dove
Raptors Gained six - Buzzard, Hobby, Sparrowhawk, Goshawk, Peregrine, Red Kite	Nightjars Lost one - European Nightjar
Crakes Lost one - Corncrake	Shrikes Lost one - Red-backed Shrike
Waders Lost one - Snipe Gained five - Little Ringed Plover, Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Avocet, Common Sandpiper	Crows Gained one - Common Raven
Gulls Gained five - Black-headed, Lesser Black-backed, Herring, Great Black-backed & Mediterranean	Crests Gained one - Firecrest
Terns Gained one - Common Tern	Warblers Lost one - Marsh Warbler Gained one - Cetti’s Warbler
Egrets Gained one - Little Egret	Chats Lost one - Whinchat
Woodpeckers and allies Lost one - Wryneck	Finches Gained one - Siskin
	Buntings Lost one - Cirl Bunting

Table 0I. Summary of new breeding species and breeding species lost in Worcestershire by family groups 1940-2020.

POPULATION TRENDS

The “arrivals and departures” are spread over a period of eight decades and trends for any species inevitably change in that time. For example, not all the “arrivals” continue to expand their range and abundance. Pochard and Ringed Plover for example are “red-listed” species of greatest conservation concern, and 11 are “amber-listed” species of moderate concern – Garganey, Shelduck, Gadwall, Shoveler, Black-headed Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Common Tern, Avocet, Common Sandpiper and Oystercatcher. Amongst the “departures”, five are still red-listed – Red-backed Shrike, Corncrake, Cirl Bunting, Whinchat and Marsh Warbler. Common Snipe is “amber-listed”.

One very striking feature is the comparative success of non-Passerine, and particularly wetland species ducks, gulls, waders, egrets and terns. The county’s lakes and marshes may not be very large areas but the management of these habitats has created the conditions to attract a highly creditable 18 new breeding species. Passerines have fared much less well both at a local and national level. The factors behind these trends, and their chronology are likely to be complex and would make an interesting topic for future research. If readers spot any gaps and omissions in the lists please let me know and I can provide an addendum to a future edition of Worcestershire Record.

Acknowledgements:

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Images

01. A pair of Marsh Warblers photographed at their nest in Defford in 1978 by Arthur Winspear Cundall. This picture is a photograph of Arthur's original 20x16 inch black and white print photographed by Harry Green May 2023.

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02. Raven at Croome in March 2020 at Croome photographed by Dave Hull. After being extinct in Worcestershire for around 100 years there was a breeding pair in 1949. Since then they have steadily increased to between 30-40 recorded pairs. See account in the following section on GAINS.

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