

The Birds of Cassiobury Park and Whippendell Woods.

By Ian Bennell

Mute Swan - Present for the majority of the year mainly on the canal; bred in 1993 raising 2 juvs and in 2005 raising 3 juvs. Adult female ringed with blue colour ring with white numbers 734.

Whooper Swan - 5 on the River Gade during severe weather on 18th Jan 1963.

White-Fronted Goose - 2 skeins, most likely of this species, flew over on 6th Mar 1970; reports of 'grey geese' in cold weather.

Canada Goose - Occasional visitor with breeding attempted in 2007 but nesting failed. Flocks of 40 over the fishing lake on 30th Aug 1971 and 44 over on 27th Oct 2005 are the largest counts.

Mallard - Resident with breeding first noted at the end of World War 2 and probable in 1958. Currently 20-30 seen around river and canal with the largest count recorded being 96 on 8th Nov 1997.



Pintail - 3 males and 5 females seen on the nature reserve on 14th Jan 1985.

Shoveler - A female on the nature reserve on 21st Jan 1968.

Wigeon - A pair over the canal on 5th Jan 1937 during cold weather followed by 6 on 29th Nov 2005 on the cress beds. A male was on the canal with Mallards on 6th Feb 2006 and 2 on 7th Mar 2006.

Teal - First recorded on 5th Jan 1937 and 31st Mar 1940. The largest count was 50 on 19th Jan 1992.

Pochard - Occurred on the fishing lake in the 1950-60's. The maximum count being 8 on the 17-19th Mar 1940.

Scaup - 5 on the River Gade during hard weather on 24th Jan 1963.

Tufted Duck- A pair on the canal for a few days in Mar 1938 was the first record. Used to winter on the gravel pit/fishing lake with the maximum count being 29 on 23rd Jan 1941 (pit now smaller). A male was on the fishing lake on 14-17th Mar 2005. The most recent report is of a Male on the fishing lake on 17th Mar 2010.

Common Scoter - A female was on the River Gade on 2-3rd Apr 1962 and probably the same bird again on the 20th.

Goldeneye - A female was on the fishing lake on 13th Jan 1996.

Mandarin Duck - A female from 10th Sep-24th Dec 1996 at least was the first record and then not recorded again until 3 were seen on 28th Nov 2004. A pair were seen on the meadow flood in Dec 2007 and again intermittently on the River Gade until Apr 2008. 2 males flew in over Whippendell Woods on 14th Apr 2008 and a pair bred, hatching 5 chicks in summer 2008. Lastly probably the same pair was seen again on 1 date in Apr 2009.

Red-Legged Partridge - Used to breed in suitable areas in the park until it was opened to the public. Last breeding recorded was around the golf course.

Pheasant - Regularly bred pre World War 2. Only recent records are of a female flushed from the base of a tree by the paddling pools and 2 males on the tennis courts early one morning (both no dates noted).

Corncrake - 1 heard frequently from mid June - 2nd July 1930 in the park.

Slavonian Grebe - 1 on the canal on 1st Jan 1965.

Little Grebe - Formerly bred on the fishing lake and on the canal in 1968. 2 were reported in 1982, 1 on 5th Jul 1988, 1 on 14th Mar 1992 and 2 seen again on cress beds on 3rd Feb 2009.

Great-Crested Grebe - Used to breed pre World War 2. In 1945 a pair bred and raised young. Last record was of a single bird on the fishing lake on 19-20th Feb 2005.

Leach's Petrel - 1 found dead in the park in late Nov 1905.

Cormorant - First noted on River Gade on 30th Jan 1963 with the biggest flocks containing 12 birds on both 20th Dec 2007 and 8th Dec 2008.

Bittern - 2 records; 1 on the cress beds on 19-22nd Jan 1963 was found dead a week later and the other on the nature reserve on 30th Oct 1967 and still present on 16th Feb 1968.

Night Heron - 1 on 24th Apr 1936 at the Gade entrance to the park was almost certainly one of four birds released 9 days earlier from Regents Park Zoo, London.

Little Egret - First recorded on 11th Feb 2004 on the cress beds and recorded every winter since with a maximum of 2 birds.

Grey Heron - A pair bred in Whippendell Woods raising 3 young in 1960. The highest count was 4 birds on floods including a juv.

Red Kite - Records becoming more frequent with the re-introduction scheme in Oxfordshire. Mainly singles seen but 3 were recorded on 5th Mar 2009 and 4 on 10th Jun 2007.

Buzzard - First recorded with 1 over Whippendell Woods on 14th Sep 1971. Singles seen on 8 separate occasions from 2001-2007.

Sparrowhawk - Breeding proved in 1934, 1949, 1951 and 1996 with a pair seen in

Whippendell Woods on 1st Jun 2005; never more than 2 birds seen at any one time.

Kestrel - Bred in 1937 in the park and 1963 on the golf course. Only a further 8 records have been noted including a pair on 20th Feb 2006 and the most recent sighting of a male on 1st Mar 2010 and was last seen on 18th Mar.

Hobby - Recorded every year from 2002 and 2009 bar 2008. All records involving single birds apart from 2 seen 'dog fighting' in mid air on 14th Aug 2005.

Merlin - A female/immature was seen on 19th Sep 1990 chasing Kingfishers along the canal!

Water Rail - A pair bred in the nature reserve in 1935 and at the time it was the only confirmed breeding record for Hertfordshire! Present in winter around the river and cress beds mainly 1's or 2's but as many as 6 in some winters (incl Jan 1996) but 8 on 9th Feb 1962 is the highest count.

Spotted Crane - 4 birds seen on the cress beds on Jan 4th 1965 with singles until Mar 4th. Single birds seen again in Mar/Apr 1973 and from 11-16th Feb 1979.

Moorhen - Resident on the river and canal generally just reaching double figures. The 3 largest flocks were 47 on 6th Mar 1990, 70 on 17th Feb 1979 and 117 on 14th Mar 1982.

Coot - Formerly bred on the fishing lake, 4 on 8th Mar 1992 being the most recorded.

Oystercatcher - A bird on 3rd Nov 2001 was heard calling whilst flying overhead then seen in the light of the bonfire heading West!

Little Ringed Plover - A bird seen (with probably the same one heard) over Westwood Quarry, Whippendell Woods on 2nd May 2004.

Lapwing - Pre World War 2 used to breed on fields around Whippendell Woods. Singles and small groups fly over occasionally.

Curlew Sandpiper - 1 on 3rd Mar 1963 on the nature reserve.

Green Sandpiper - Used to be regular in winter from 1941 on the cress beds. 7 in 1941; 1 bird seen each year from 1989-1996.

Common Sandpiper - 1 on 21st Apr 1940 on the nature reserve.

Redshank - 1 on 3rd Feb 1963 on the nature reserve.

Woodcock - Was a regular in spring pre World War 2 but only 1 record since on 9th Feb 1991.

Snipe - Mainly a winter visitor on cress beds with bigger numbers in severe weather; the largest groups being 51 on 31st Jan 1976 and 71 on 14th Jan 1979.

Jack Snipe - 6 seen on 9th Feb 1969 is the highest count seen with up to 3 in severe weather. Last record was 1 on 23-24th Jan 2006.

Ruff - 1 bird was forced down by a snow storm on 8th Feb 1969.

Black-Headed Gull - Regular on the sports pitches, 200+ seen on 18th Jul 2003 being a

good count.

Common Gull - Odd birds seen mainly in late autumn - late winter with Black-Headed Gulls.

Herring Gull - In recent years this species has become resident in Watford town centre so is seen more frequently.

Great Black-Backed Gull - Odd single birds recorded flying over the park and River Gade.

Lesser Black-Backed Gull - Also has become resident in Watford town centre and on occasion 10+ birds appear on the sports pitches.

Sandwich Tern - 3 birds flew along River Gade on 16th Aug 2006.

Common Tern - 1's and 2's seen over fishing lake and along River Gade with the odd fly over.

Feral Pigeon - Mainly seen flying over in singles and small groups and generally only seen on the ground feeding on seeded areas! 2 lost Racing Pigeons have been seen and 2 newly fledged juvs were seen on 6th Mar 1990.

Stock Dove - Mainly favour old Oak trees in the centre of the park near Café and tennis courts. A pair was seen feeding 2 juvs on 1st Oct 2002. 9 recorded territories on 1st May 2003.

Woodpigeon - Very common in the park and in the woods with quite a few juvs seen in late summer - autumn. Migrating flocks have been noted on occasion with 600+ on 22nd Dec 2005, 270+ over in the first 20 minutes of daylight on 27th Oct 2006 and on 5th Nov 2009 707 were counted in 1 hour.

Collared Dove - First bred in 1967 and up to 50 birds used to be seen on the nature reserve. Nowadays 5-10 birds are seen but infrequently.

Turtle Dove - At least 3 pairs used to breed on the golf course and nature reserve. 1 was seen on 10th Sep 1984.

Ring-Necked Parakeet - The first record was of a single bird on 21st Dec 1987. The next sighting was 17 years later when 11 flew over in mid November 2004. They are now seen throughout the year with a preference for autumn/winter time. Has been witnessed inspecting holes for nesting but as yet no valid proof of breeding. Numbers remain low with groups of 13-20 seen but a flock of c.100 in Oct 2009 for one day was exceptional.

Cuckoo - Used to be a regular sight most Aprils with the favoured hosts for its eggs being Dunnock and Garden Warbler. 1 bird that flew over the paddling pools calling on 26th Apr 2007 is the only modern day record found.

Short-Eared Owl - 1 bird over rough ground near the canal bridge on 31st Jan 1954 is the only record.

Tawny Owl - 1 was found dead in the river on 5th Jul 1988. 6+ pairs were noted in Whippendell Woods in Mar 1993 with a further pair in the park. On 5th May 2006 a bird was seen in flight in daylight being chased by 2 Carrion Crows.

- Barn Owl** - Seen occasionally until 1950 and probably once bred in the ruins of Swiss Cottage and Cassiobury Mansion. A later record was of one around the golf course (no date).
- Little Owl** - First noted in 1938 but not regularly reported until Sep 2007 when a pair was seen favouring 2 old Oak trees. This pair bred and raised 1 juv in 2008.
- Nightjar** - None seen since 1939 but previously seen every summer in Whippendell Woods.
- Swift** - Formerly bred in ruined buildings with only small numbers now and usually from the third week in April onwards. Larger numbers sometimes seen during stormy weather being forced down with c.50 over Whippendell Woods on 21st Jun 2006.
- Kingfisher** - Up until 1941 3 pairs bred around the cress beds but in recent years 1 pair has been seen around the canal/river and on the cress beds. Exceptions being 4 seen on 2nd Feb 1992 and 3 (inc 1 juv) on 4th Jun 1990.
- Green Woodpecker** - Resident in the park and around golf course. Young were noted in the park from 2006-2009, with 6 juvs in Aug 2006 along with adult birds.
- Great-Spotted Woodpecker** - Resident in the park with as many as 4 pairs in Jun 2005. Drumming starts from mid Dec onwards.
- Lesser-Spotted Woodpecker** - Bred in 1939 in Whippendell Woods. A female was seen feeding juv/s on 8th Jun 1992 in Whippendell Woods. 4 were seen on 7th Jun 1993 also in Whippendell Woods, noted as being a family party. 2 males were seen at the same nest hole on 13th May 2006 and an active nest was found on 3rd Jun 2008 with at least 3 juvs.
- Wryneck** - 3 records of single birds on 26th May 1932, 5-7th May 1936 and 22nd Apr 1937.
- Skylark** - Used to breed regularly prior to 1938 after which it was mainly confined to the golf course. Occasional migrants over with odd birds on the ground favouring the sports pitches. The highest day count is 5 birds in autumn 2009.
- Woodlark** - Bred and reared young in open area of Whippendell Woods in 1950. The only other record was of a male on 17th May 1959.
- Sand Martin** - Previously recorded annually over River Gade but most recently only 1 record of a single bird on 31st Mar 2006.
- Swallow** - Small numbers through on migration but, as with Swifts, large numbers can appear with the onset of bad weather. 115 on 24th Sep 2007 during heavy rain is a good example. A bird on 4th Nov 2009 was the latest ever record for the park.
- House Martin** - Possibly as many as 10-15 pairs breeding on houses on the adjoining Cassiobury Park Avenue. These birds often fly down onto the cricket square for mud to build their nests. Occasional large numbers go through with 100+ in 1 hour on 3rd Sep 2003 and 50+ forced down by rain and being hunted by a Hobby.
- Water Pipit** - Since 1965 up to 4 birds were on cress beds from about Nov-Mar. 3 were seen on 19th Jan 1987 and 1 was recorded in the winters of 1986, 88 and 89.

- Meadow Pipit** - As many as 50 birds used to winter on the cress beds but now reports are limited to fly overs and the odd grounded bird. 1 bird that landed on snow on 3rd Feb 2009 must have wondered what it was doing as it only stayed for 30 seconds! 24 that flew over on 20th Oct 2009 doubled the previous high day count.
- Tree Pipit** - 3 pairs used to breed annually on the golf course and Whippendell Woods (no dates), no records since.
- Pied Wagtail** - Present throughout the year in small numbers. 2 pairs probably bred in the park in Jun 2006 with a pair + 3 juvs and another pair with 1 juv seen. Numbers generally peak in autumn with 40+ in Oct 2006 and 59 on 22nd Oct 2005.
- White Wagtail** - 1 male first seen on 13th Mar 2004 was seen again on the 14th with 10 Pied Wagtails on the croquet lawns.
- Yellow Wagtail** - Just 3 records, the first was a female with a juv near the nature reserve on 14th Jul 1967. The second record was on 20th Sep 2002 and the last was of a bird flying over head calling on 15th Jul 2005.
- Grey Wagtail** - Bred in 1929, 1934 and 1938-41. In 2006 at least 10 birds including juvs were seen on 27th Jul. A pair nested on the lock gates next to the canal bridge in 2008 but heavy rain probably washed out the nest.
- Dipper** - 1 seen on 9th Mar 1994 is the only record.
- Waxwing** - Recorded in irruption years with 13 on 22nd Feb 1947. This was the last documented record until 59 were found on 7th Mar 2005. These were probably part of a 70+ strong flock in nearby Croxley Green.
- Dunnock** - Fairly numerous with 10+ singing males in Whippendell Woods on 1st May 2002.
- Robin** - One of the most commonly seen birds in both the park and woods with 20 birds in Whippendell Woods on 5th May 2001.
- Nightingale** - Was a regular visitor but had declined by the late 1930's. The last record was during 1957 when 2 pairs almost certainly bred by the golf course and in Whippendell Woods.
- Redstart** - Bred in 1944 + and 1954 in Whippendell Woods but generally only recorded on isolated occasions in spring.
- Wheatear** - 5 birds have been recorded with the first on 29th Apr 1910 on the golf course. The second was in the park on 25th Apr 1938. There was a 79 year gap till the 3rd record of 2 females on 11th May 2007. The 4th record came just 10 or so months later when a male was found during heavy rain on 28th Mar 2008.
- Stonechat** - Last recorded on 29th Dec 1938 in the park. Formerly evident in the surrounding district from 1926-32 particularly along the Met Line embankment.
- Song Thrush** - Was very common in the 60's and 70's but along with the national trend numbers have fallen with only 10 singing males on 1st Jan 2003 though young have been seen for the last 3 years mainly around the Shepherds Road entrance

and 15+ birds were seen on 20th Dec 2007.

Redwing - Favours the sports pitches and nearby leaf litter; during hard weather moves nearer the river/nature reserve. During the latter parts of winter some large flocks gather with 350+ on 2nd Mar 1996 and once 1000+ in one of the latter years of the noughties.

Mistle Thrush - Fairly common with birds seen all year round with post breeding flocks occurring in Aug. 20 were seen on 6th Aug 2004 and 35 flew out of a single tree by the paddling pools on 22nd Aug 2006. Between 1982-84 a Xanthistic bird was seen in the park (all normal colours replaced by yellow).

Fieldfare - Not as numerous as Redwing with birds generally seen overhead; 70+ flew over in 1 hour on 14th Nov 2003 and a flock of 93 flew over on 8th Nov 2009.

Blackbird - Very common around the park, with 30+ on 20th Dec 2007 being a good count.

Garden Warbler - In the 1971 report it was classed as uncommon and probably still is! 2 birds in sub song on 11th Sep 1990 and single singing male every spring from 2007-09 are the only other records.

Blackcap - 8 Territories were held in the mid 1990's with 12 singing males on 1st May 2003. Breeding has been proven in 2008 and 2009 when young were seen in the park.

Whitethroat - Used to be very common but in 1969 only 1 singing male was found. 2 singing males were heard on 1st May 2003. A male was seen and heard on territory in the small orchard area behind the bowls club for 3 consecutive summers but breeding wasn't proven.

Lesser Whitethroat - Bred regularly until 1938 but then just occasional spring records. A male was singing for the morning on 5th May 2006 by the tennis courts and 2 other/same males were heard singing by the river on 25th Apr 2007 and 28th Apr 2008.

Sedge Warbler - Only 2 records of 2-3 birds could be found with a singing male on 18th Apr 2003 and another singing male along the river/cress beds in 2007 and 2008.

Cetti's Warbler - A singing male at the cress beds next to the fishing lake from 22nd May - 14th Jun 1997 is so far the only record of this increasingly common bird.

Reed Warbler - Recorded by the River Gade from Apr-Jun from 1965-1971 followed by a pair seen in 1983 and 2 territories in Jun 1996.

Willow Warbler - Very common in the 1970's; 7 were in Whippendell Woods on 18th Jun 1988; 3 territories were in the park in Jun 1997 with odd birds seen in last few years including a bird on territory between the river and canal in 2008.

Wood Warbler - A singing male in Whippendell Woods in May 1986 for one day is the only record.

Chiffchaff - 4 territories in the mid 1990's. 10 singing males were found on 1st May 2003. Some winter records have been noted but it is more frequently recorded in

spring. Odd singing males are still heard into Oct/Nov if the weather is warm enough.

Goldcrest - Breeding was proven in 1958 and used to be more of a winter visitor but now is seen all year round. 6 males in the park and 5 males in Whippendell Woods were seen on 1st May 2003. A dying juv was found outside the council yard on 1st Jul 2002 and 11 birds were seen in a tit flock on 18th Sep 2007.

Firecrest - 1 seen on 12th Nov 2005 is the only record.

Wren - Very numerous throughout the park though mainly heard rather than seen; becomes more obvious in cold weather as it searches for food.

Spotted Flycatcher - Small numbers were seen in the 1970's with 1 & 2's in both the park and the woods during the 1990's. A pair were also seen in 2003, 2004 and 2008 around the tennis courts and Cha Cha café usually from the second week of Jun.

Pied Flycatcher - 1 was seen in Whippendell Woods on 20th Apr 1947.

Great Tit - Very common throughout the park and woods with fairly large flocks in winter.

Coal Tit - 15 territories were held in Whippendell Woods in 2006. 6 birds (2 adults and 4 juvs) were seen on 6th Jun 2005.

Blue Tit - Pretty much the same as Great Tit but possibly slightly bigger numbers in the flocks in winter.

Marsh Tit - 2 pairs in May 1993 and 4 territories in Jun 1996. A male was singing on 13th Mar 2004 and a family party (2 adults and 3-4 juvs) seen on 18th Jun 2004. 3 territories were held in Whippendell Woods in 2006.

Willow Tit - The 1971 report stated that it was more common than Marsh Tit. It was found in all habitats particularly near the River Gade and canal. During winter it was found in Whippendell Woods. Breeding occurred in 1985 and 1 was seen in Feb 1988, Dec 1989 and Feb 1993.

Long-Tailed Tit - Breeds in small numbers with larger groups during winter. 65+ were seen around the park on 10th Feb 2009 with 47 of those in one flock.

Nuthatch - Fairly common with breeding proved in 2007 with a family party in the council yard. 8 territories were held in May 2003, 10 in Mar 2005 and 8-9 in Whippendell Woods in 2006. A freshly dead bird was found at the base of a tree in 2009.

Treecreeper - 12 territories were held in 1996 in Whippendell Woods and 8 in the park on 1st May 2003. 10+ birds were seen 11th Feb 2008 and a family party of 7 birds was seen in 2009.

Red-Backed Shrike - Was a regular breeder in the Whippendell Woods area until 1933 when 4-5 pairs bred. There was a gap until 1941 and then the last record of one on the golf course in 1964.

Magpie - Considered rare in 1909 because of persecution by local gamekeepers but now is very common with a flock of 20 seen on 8th Mar 1993 and 21 birds seen on 16th Dec 2004.

Jay - Generally seen throughout the year with larger gatherings in autumn feeding on acorns and burying them for the winter. 15 were seen in autumn 2003 and 10+ on 25th Oct 2006.



Jackdaw - in the 1971 report it is stated that it's a very common bird. A flock of c.90 birds in 2009 that flew over the park and into Whippendell Woods would seem to show that its still fairly common.

Rook - There was a rookery around the golf course in the 1960's but not since. Further attempts at colonisation were made but usually failed after a few years. Odd birds fly over on occasion.

Carrion Crow - In the 1971 report it was a fairly common breeder but usually only seen in fairly small numbers. The same can be said for now with no more than 10 birds seen at any one time.

Raven - The newest addition to the list with a bird seen over the council yard being mobbed by 6 Carrion Crows on 12th Nov 2009 before flying off low towards the Met line station.

Starling - Fairly common around the park with annual breeding occurring mainly in old woodpecker holes. Post breeding flocks can reach 100+ birds in early autumn.

Golden Oriole - One was recorded in the first week of Jun 1943 in gardens adjoining the park.

House Sparrow - Was reported as very common in the 1971 report but now is restricted to a few adjoining gardens with around 40-50 birds hanging on.

Tree Sparrow - Used to breed in small numbers around the golf course in elms and in Whippendell Woods.

Chaffinch - Fairly common bird with numbers growing in autumn/winter time to around 30 birds; 70+ were seen on 30th Jan 1996.

Brambling - Most records concern birds either seen or heard flying overhead. The first record of 1 on 28th Oct 1993 was followed by 6 in Whippendell Woods. Three were seen on 22nd Oct 2005 and 2 on 11th Nov 2004. All other records are of

single birds.

Linnet - A few pairs used to breed on the golf course but recently odd fly-overs are seen. One such record was 1 on 27th Oct 2005.

Lesser Redpoll - In the 1971 report it is described as a winter visitor from 1965-1971 then a few pairs used to breed around the golf course. 3 pairs were reported in 1985. The odd small flock has appeared in recent years with c.25 in with Siskins in Jan 2004 and 50+ in Jan 2007.

Mealy Redpoll - 1 bird was reported in Dec 1994 followed by a male in Mar 2004 with 2 reported on the 9th and 3 on the 25th.

Goldfinch - Bred in 1932, 1934 and 1940. Since 1953 has had a tendency to breed in trees surrounding the park. 60+ were seen on 20th Feb 2006 and a nest was built in a Sycamore tree next to the playground at Cha Cha café in Apr 2008 but was abandoned before it was used due to heavy rain.

Greenfinch - Common in the 1971 report. The odd flock of around 10 birds is seen but records mainly from fly-overs.

Siskin - Flocks of c.100 were mentioned in the 1971 report. 110 were seen on 8th Nov 1997 and 100+ on the 7th Jan 2006.

Bullfinch - Described as well distributed and increasing in 1971 report, it is pretty uncommon nowadays with just odd birds seen. 2 pairs in Dec 2001 and a pair with juvs seen in 2008; 5 were seen on 18th Jun 1988 and 15 on 22nd Jan 2007 were good counts.

Hawfinch - Bred in 1951 and probably in '54. Unconfirmed records of breeding from the nature reserve. A pair were reported in Whippendell Woods in 1985/86 and also seen in 1988/89.

Crossbill - Just 2 records of this species; 1 near the east end of the park on 3rd Aug 2003 and 4 that flew over the council depot on 27th May 2008.

Reed Bunting - Bred in 1937 and 1957 and probably in 2008. 1 or 2 males were seen in 2007/08 and there were 2 territories in 1997.

Yellowhammer - Common in 1971 report on the golf course and in Whippendell Woods.

Escapes -

Black Swan - 2 flew North along the river on 4th Feb 2008.

Cockatiel - 1 on 25th Jun 2002 over the cricket square.

Eastern Rosella - A singing bird was seen on 10th Mar 2005.

Budgerigar - A yellow and white coloured bird was seen on 27th Oct 2006.

Zebra Finch - A bird was seen and heard calling from trees near Cha Cha café on 9th Dec 2004.

Parakeet sp - A probable Plum-Faced Parakeet was seen on a couple of unrecorded dates.