



Skerne Wood @ NETPark



Common Bird Census Report 2024

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THE 2024 COMMON BIRD CENSUS

Skerne Wood @ NETPark

Woodland and Wildlife Community Woodland, Sedgefield

Introduction

During March to June 2024, the fourth annual breeding bird censuses was carried out at the Skerne Wood @ NETPark Woodland and Wildlife community woodland in Sedgefield.

From the mapping fieldwork, an estimation of the number of bird territories at the woodland is then calculated. This report summarises this data, makes comparisons with the previous years and looks at the overall UK bird population trend for selected species. Using the data collected, it is possible to better understand the birds at the woodland to enable proactive habitat management to conserve and protect these species present and encourage wider biodiversity.



Looking south and onto the census site with the Pine Wood to the right. The weedy fields bordering the site are superb habitat for host of 'red listed' species, especially Sedge Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler, Linnet, Reed Bunting, and Barn Owl (Frederick Milton)

Front Cover – New Skerne Wood information board installed in October 2024 (Melissa Hinton)

The Common Bird Census Methodology

The Common Bird Census (CBC) is based upon a simple mapping method devised by the British Trust for Ornithology, in which 8 to 10 visits are made to a defined site over the breeding season, March to June. All contacts with birds, by sight or call, are recorded by species code on a large-scale map. Additional symbols are added to denote whether the bird is singing, calling, or moving in a certain direction, its sex if known, if there is nesting behaviour and whether the species is involved in any territorial boundary disputes with another bird. This additional behaviour is crucial. A registration of a singing male bird immediately identifies it as a bird holding or marking territory. Similarly, nesting behaviour indicates the existence of a nest and therefore a species holding territory. Territories are defined, for the purpose of the study, as a bird being present in the same area over a 14-day period. Unless a nest or similar evidence exist, birds which are recorded less than three times in the same area are not deemed to be holding territories.

At the end of the season these 'visit' maps are examined, and each site visit given a visit letter: A, B, C etc. Each record on the visit map is transferred to separate 'species' maps' to show how each type of bird is distributed across the site and the individual bird's breeding territories. From this, an estimate of breeding density for the site can be calculated. Nest boxes installed on the site are checked and this additional information feeds into the CBC analysis.

The Survey Site



Outline of surveyed area (Google Map 2021)

Blue shaded area indicates area of site within the new construction zone, with land adjacent to the site on the west and north also part of the building site.

The Woodland and Wildlife site is a strip of land to the north of Sedgfield village in County Durham. The site is approximately 13 acres in area and is bounded on 2 sides

by roads – William Armstrong Way on the west side and on the east, the B1278 Salters Lane, Fishburn to Sedgefield road.



The pond and surrounding scrub are always excellent for a range of species including Reed Bunting, Linnet, Wren, and Song Thrush (Frederick Milton)

The north of the site is mainly bounded by rank vegetated fields of principally Rosebay Willowherb (*Chamaenerion angustifolium*) a valuable food source for numerous species of moths and butterflies, a useful nectar source for pollinators, including bees, and a superb habitat for many bird species, particularly Common Whitethroat. The north side also includes hedgerows, agricultural farmland, farmsteads, and then Hardwick Grange, a new housing development. To the south lies the NETPark or North East Technology Park Science park, mixed housing and then Sedgefield village. The west side of the site was previously agricultural land, the remainder formed part of the grounds of the now demolished Sedgefield Hospital. This legacy includes remanent 'ornamental' tree species, such as Laurel and Privet, as well as some mature Beech trees.

The site is best described as a blend of parkland and 'marginal' land. There are some notable habitat features. These include a small Scots Pine woodland (the 'Pine Wood'), mixed hedgerows and plantations of Dogrose, Lime, Sweet Chestnut, Ash, Buckthorn, Sycamore, Hawthorn, Elder, Beech and Alder, a small pond dominated by Bulrush (*Typha latifolia*), and a mature woodland of mostly Sycamore, Ash and Beech ('Salters Lane Wood'). There are also areas of marginal grassland which has a rich mosaic of flora and some mown lawns managed by NETPark. Since 2018, the site

has been managed for wildlife by the Sedgefield Woodland and Wildlife community group. Saplings of native tree species have been planted in 3 phases, the most recent being a mixed species hedgerow in 2021. Several footpaths traverse the site. Habitat work in 2024 was again minimal, scything of grasslands, path maintenance and some small-scale tree planting. In October 2024, a new information board was installed at the southwest entrance of the site, with the new official title of the site to be known as **Skerne Wood**.



Salters Lane Wood on the east of the site is home to an extensive rookery as well as Tawny Owl and common birds including Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Wren, and Goldcrest (Frederick Milton)

In 2023, the expansion of NETPark led to large-scale land development to the west and north of a sector of the site around the William Armstrong Way. Construction work continued in 2024, with busy activity around the site offices, the creation of a carpark and the construction of industrial units.

Site Visits 2024

Ten visits were carried out in March to June. All were undertaken, where possible, in the morning when the site is less disturbed and to maximise the number of singing birds recorded.

VISIT LETTER	DATE	TIME	WEATHER	COVERAGE/COMMENTS
A	16.03.24	0800-0915	Sunny, Wind nil, Cold 5-8C	Bird activity high
B	24.03.24	0730-0900	Sunny, Wind moderate, cold NW Cold 5-8C	Low bird activity
C	06.04.24	0800-0930	Rain at first, then sunny spells. Wind light SW, Mild 10C	Moderate bird activity, delayed start due to rain
D	20.04.24	0700-0830	Sunny, Wind light NW, Very cold, 0-2C	Low bird activity due to cold
E	04.05.24	0615-0745	Drizzle, Wind nil, Misty. Wind nil. 8C	Moderate bird activity
F	11.05.24	0630-0830	Sunny, Wind nil, Warm 16C	Moderate bird activity. Public event
G	25.05.24	0700-0830	Sunny, Wind nil, Warm 18C	Moderate bird activity
H	02.06.24	0700-0830	Sunny, Wind nil, Hot 13-20C	High bird activity
J	15.06.24	0615-0800	Heavy rain at first interrupted survey, then thick cloud. Wind Nil, Cold, 7-12C	High bird activity, surprising given poor conditions
K	30.06.24	0630-0800	Sunny spells, Moderate NW wind, Cool 10C	Low bird activity

The table above illustrates the 10 complete CBC visits made during the year – the standard set for the site. Visit weather conditions reflected the predominant UK weather data from March to June of unsettled, very wet (the Northeast received 150-170% of its usual rainfall) and dull days with a succession of low pressure and frontal systems bringing rain and wind and then northerly winds in June and cold Arctic air to the UK. This interrupted and postponed several survey visits, hence the later than usual start to fieldwork and the later finish in June. These conditions may have impacted bird breeding attempts and the availability of insect food.¹ A total of 15.5 hours fieldwork was carried out, a slight decrease on the previous year.

¹ *Seasonal Assessment – Spring 2024*, Available at <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/weather/learn-about/uk-past-events/summaries/seasonal-assessment---spring24.pdf>; *Seasonal Assessment – Summer 2024*. Available at: <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/weather/learn-about/uk-past-events/summaries/seasonal-assessment---summer24.pdf>

Nestboxes

No new bird boxes were installed, with 24 small boxes available. The protective metal hole plates, installed because of damage by either Great Spotted Woodpecker or Grey Squirrel appeared to have prevented further destruction. There are also a small number of other 'tit' boxes on site, but because of their design it has proved impossible to inspect these boxes without damage. Four specialist 'large' boxes for Kestrel and Stock Dove are also in situ.

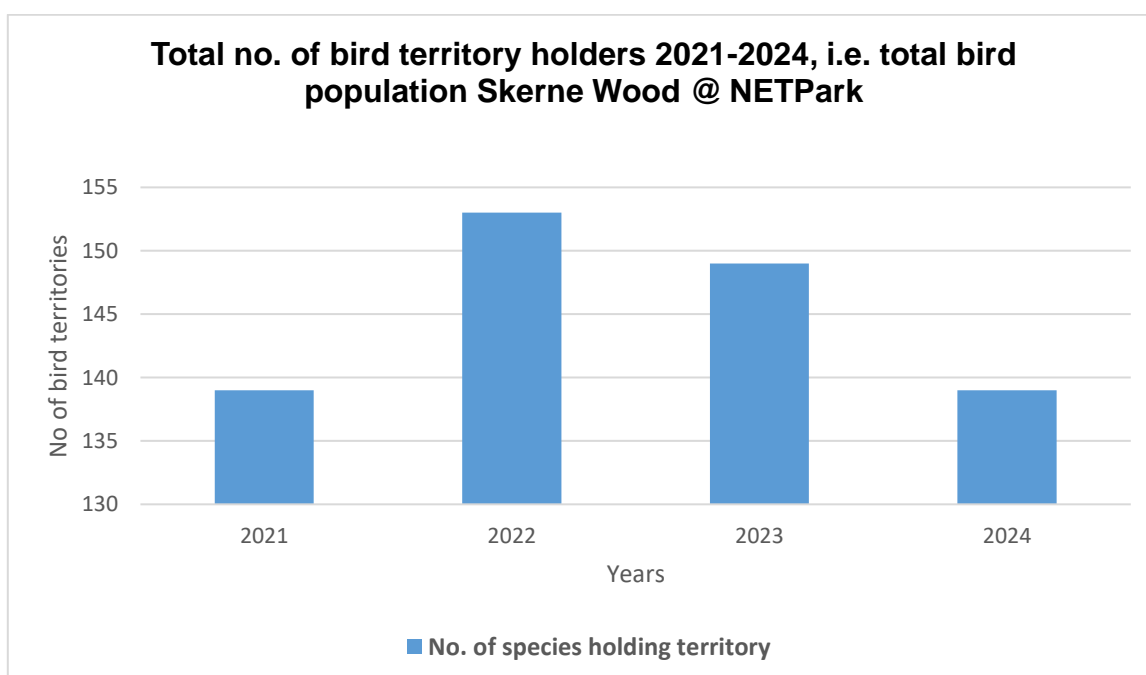
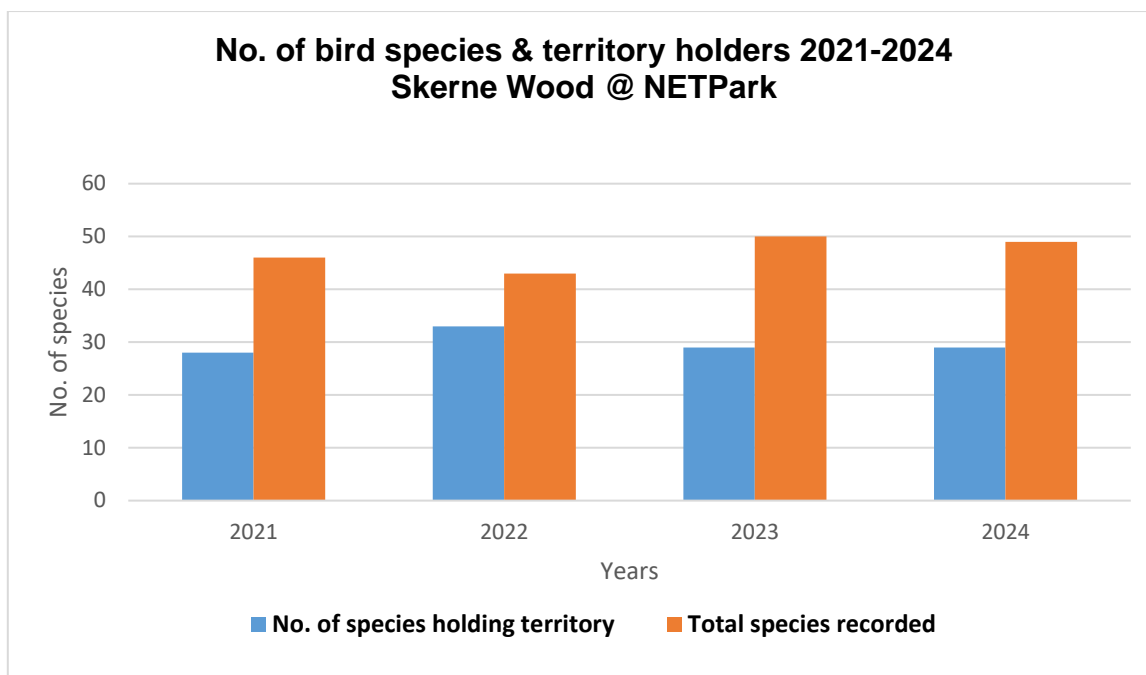


Kestrel breeding in the box in the Pine Wood (Frederick Milton)

In the previous years, boxes were inspected during the breeding season to confirm usage. This year, given the cold and wet weather in May, it was decided not to check the boxes to prevent undue disturbance. However, during surveying it was recorded that 2 boxes were occupied by Great Tit and another box was used by Blue Tit. Of the larger boxes, one was used by Kestrel and 3 young were successfully raised, whilst Jackdaw, a new breeding bird for the site, occupied another box and was thought to have fledged young.

Results of the 2024 Common Bird Census

A total of 49 bird species were recorded during the 2024 CBC. These included 3 new species for survey – **Shelduck**, **Tawny Owl** and **Brambling**, bringing the total number of birds recorded during 2021-2024 CBC fieldwork to 74 species, 35 of which have been recorded every year. Four species of overflying Gulls have been noted but are not added to the survey results. Quite surprisingly, **House Sparrow** is still to be recorded, despite its ubiquitous presence in Sedgefield. The fieldwork has led to a growing bank of datasets. A selection are reproduced in the report.



Ducks to Woodpeckers

A single **Shelduck** was recorded in April in neighbouring fields. The species breeds locally in small numbers at Bishop Middleham. **Mallard** was noted on several dates, but there was insufficient evidence to suggest territory holding. Just a single pair of **Pheasant** were mapped, a reduction from 3 pairs in 2021 and 2022. This decline may be linked to patterns of local game bird releases. **Stock Dove** was recorded twice, but no territory was proven. **Woodpigeon** numbers increased to a site record of 10 pairs spread across the site. Nationally, the species has undergone a 33.4% population

increase over the period 1995 to 2022 and is now commonly seen in many Sedgefield gardens. Possible influences for this rise include wider winter cereal and rape cultivation, a key winter food, and the extensive availability of garden bird food.² **Collared Dove** held a single territory, with displaying birds noted on several visits in May. Overflying **Oystercatchers**, including a flock of 5 birds in May, were noted on several dates.



Surveying on some days was difficult – very wet in June (Frederick Milton)

Two birds of prey were recorded. **Kestrel** nested in one of the boxes in the Pine Wood, with 3 young fledged. After an absence in 2023, **Sparrowhawk** was recorded twice in 2024. Despite being seen regularly on the site throughout the year, **Buzzard** was not recorded on any of the survey visits, hence no territory can be mapped. A possible **Hobby** was seen in May, although identification was not conclusive. The species was later seen on several dates throughout July and August around Sedgefield and Bishop Middleham, with breeding suspected in the area. A confirmed record for the CBC is long overdue. **Barn Owl** has been regularly seen around the site in previous years, although not during surveying, and a dead bird was found in 2023, probably a road traffic victim. Therefore, it was pleasing to see a bird hunting the weedy fields bordering the north of the site in mid-June. The first **Tawny Owl** for the census was recorded in June in Salters Lane Wood. A bird was 'mobbed' by a host of other birds including

² <https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/woodpigeon>

Blackbird and Wren. It is highly likely that Tawny Owl breed in the woodland, but due to its nocturnal lifestyle, and the CBC early morning fieldwork, the owl has been probably overlooked. **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was not recorded in 2023, but although 2 birds were mapped in 2024 there was insufficient evidence to suggest a territory.

Crows to Warblers

Four species of crows were recorded. With exception of **Jackdaw** nesting in the Pine Wood, a new breeding species for the survey, the remaining 3 corvids all had a poor year with significant declines in numbers, perhaps linked to the inclement spring weather. **Magpie** dropped from 4 pairs in 2023 to just 2 this year. **Rook** is by far the commonest breeding CBC bird with 2 rookeries in Salters Lane Wood. Despite remaining constant at 28 active nests from 2021 to 2023, nest numbers dropped to 22 this year. The species is in decline in the UK, with a 23% population fall 1995-2022, although reasons for this are not yet understood.³ Disturbance by users of the heavily used bike track below 'our' rookeries cannot be ruled out as a local factor. After reaching a record 4 pairs in the previous year, unexpectedly **Carriion Crow** numbers fell to all time low of just a single pair.



Blue Tit and Great Tit nests in the bird boxes (Frederick Milton)

Coal Tit numbers remained static for the fourth consecutive year, with a single pair in the Pine Wood. **Blue Tit** numbers increased to a record 9 pairs, whilst **Great Tit** fell to 5 pairs. Both species occupied the boxes. Sadly, there was no sightings of the increasingly rare **Willow Tit** after last year's single pair. As in 2023, although **Long Tailed Tit** was recorded, no territories were proven with birds recorded on only 2 occasions.

³ <https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/rook>

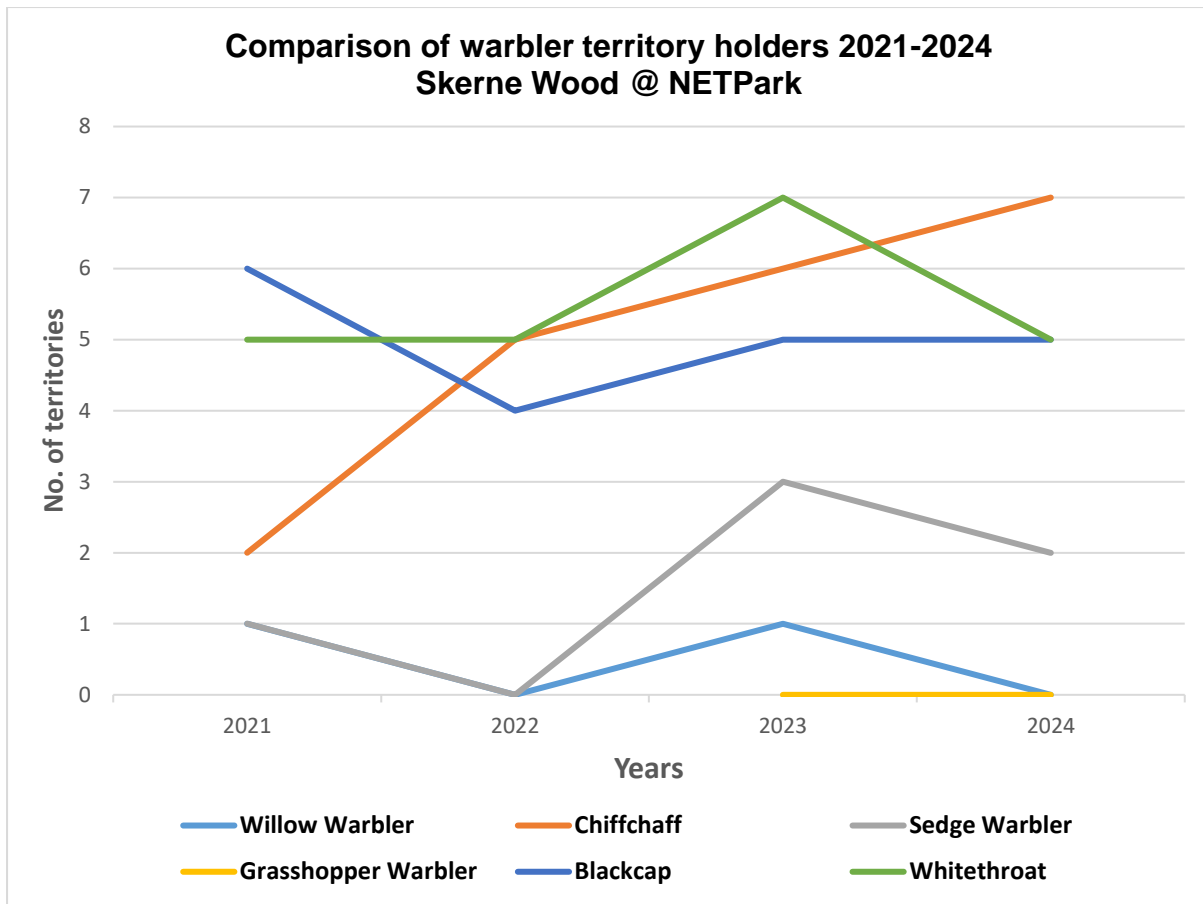


Common Whitethroat (Brian Clasper)

A singing **Skylark** was recorded twice but no territory was mapped. Its previously favoured area on the northwest border of the site lies within the construction works. Again, **Swallow** and **House Martin** were recorded, with the former probably breeding in surrounding farmsteads and the latter in Sedgefield village.

Warbler species had a mixed year. After returning as a territory holder in 2023, it was disappointing that only a single singing **Willow Warbler** was noted in mid-May. **Chiffchaff** continued their remarkable increase, with a record 7 pairs mapped this year. A pair occupied the Pine Wood, 3 were in the centre of the site, 2 pairs in Salters Lane Wood and further pair were at the pond area. It is now the commonest warbler on site. A noteworthy 6 singing **Sedge Warbler** were seen on 4 May, however these were presumably nearly all passage birds, as mapped territories fell back slightly to just 2 pairs in the weedy fields on the site's northern boundary. The UK Sedge Warbler population is largely affected by rainfall in their wintering grounds south of the Sahara Desert, in the West African Sahel. Nationally, the species has undergone a slight population rise since 2020.⁴ **Grasshopper Warbler** was again heard 'reeling' in the weedy fields adjacent Hardwick Grange, although frustratingly it was only heard twice; insufficient presence for it to be confirmed as territory holding. **Blackcap** numbers remained static at 5 pairs for the second consecutive year. **Common Whitethroat** was previously the most common warbler in 2023, but numbers returned to their 2021-22 levels of 5 pairs, with a confirmed loss of the 'traditional' territory in the very northwest corner of the site now under development. The graph opposite illustrates the population trends for 6 warbler species mapped over the period 2021-24. Grasshopper Warbler was present 2023-24, but no territories proven and a single **Lesser Whitethroat** recorded in 2022 is not included.

⁴ <https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/sedge-warbler>



Crests to Buntings

Goldcrest numbers increased to 2 pairs, with birds in the usual Pine Wood location and now Salters Lane Wood. Another mild winter aided **Wren** numbers, 13 pairs were recorded, a slight decrease of a single pair, but it retained its status as the second commonest bird on site. **Treecreeper** is incredibly difficult to record due to its diminutive size, weak call, and cryptic plumage. Just a single sighting was made this year. The 3 resident thrush species remained largely unchanged. **Song Thrush** numbers dropped slightly to 4 pairs. A single **Mistle Thrush** pair held territory, with juvenile birds again noted in June. **Blackbird** numbers remained stable at 10 pairs, with the cut lawns being favoured feeding spots. Robin increased to 8 pairs, a record number for the survey with birds being evenly spread across the site. Again, **Tree Sparrow** was sparsely recorded – just single birds in the Pine Wood and on Salters Lane.

There was a slight dip in **Dunnock** numbers to 7 pairs, after remaining stable at 8 pairs for 3 years. Nationally, Dunnock has undergone a 40% decrease in numbers since the late 1960s, and after a slight recovery from 1995, from 2015 onwards the bird again declined. Suggested factors include agricultural intensification and reduced winter food availability, and for woodland populations, loss of understorey habitat. Active woodland management and food provision during the 'hungry months' of February and March are suggested to mitigate further losses and provide us some

guidance on management of our site.⁵ Over the lifespan of the survey, **Pied Wagtail** has maintained a single territory, this was again the case, with breeding likely in one of the adjacent industrial units.



Chaffinch (Rudolf Reichal)

Seven species of finch were recorded. **Chaffinch** numbers remained static for the third consecutive year at 8 territories. **Brambling** was a new species for the survey. In March, a flock of 10 of these relatively scarce Scandinavian winter visitors were seen feeding on Beech mast. Another 30 were also in Beech at nearby Winterton and woodland adjacent to Neville Drive. For the third consecutive year, **Bullfinch** remained stable at 2 pairs, with birds in the Pine Wood and Salters Lane Wood. A single **Greenfinch** territory was mapped, with breeding likely in the adjacent NETPark conifers. **Linnet** had an excellent year. Just 4 years ago there was just a single pair. This year, 4 pairs were recorded, all along the ‘scrubby’ northern boundary, underlining again the importance of this ‘marginal’ habitat. Linnet is a ‘red listed’ Bird of Conservation Concern, its UK breeding population haven fallen by 23% in 1995–2022, thought to be related to agricultural intensification, so any uptick is welcome.⁶ **Goldfinch** recovered slightly from last year’s low of 3 pairs to 4 pairs. **Siskin** was recorded in March, most probably these were birds on passage. With the loss of its favoured north-west corner to development, **Yellowhammer** is hanging on, with just a single bird this year. For the fourth successive year, a single **Reed Bunting** was mapped on the northern boundary hedgerow.

Summary

Despite the generally poor weather conditions throughout the survey, 2024 was a reasonable year for the birds of Skerne Wood. The wet weather in late summer 2023 was the sixth wettest July on record, but appeared to have little discernible effect on the overall bird population, a conclusion also reached by national monitoring.⁷ It is too

⁵ <https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/dunnock>

⁶ <https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/linnet>

⁷ BTO (2023), *Preliminary report on the 2023 breeding season*. Available at : <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/bird-ringing-scheme/ringing-surveys/constant-effort-sites/historical-preliminary-ces-results/2023-ces-results>

early to say if this year's poor weather affected breeding, but when writing this report, there has been concern from several northeast birdwatchers about a visible lack of our 'common' resident species at their birdwatching sites. More will be known in due course when published study papers are available.

The continuing development of the northwest corner of the site appears to have led to the loss of Yellowhammer and Skylark as territory holders. However, one of the nestboxes installed as mitigation to habitat loss in the Pine Wood was occupied by the first breeding Jackdaw on site and the successful breeding of Kestrel also in the Pine Wood demonstrates the ability of birds to tolerate construction disruption. Several new species were seen in 2023, underlining the site's continuing potential. The number of species recorded was the second highest, but the total bird population for the site fell from 149 pairs in 2023 to 139 pairs this year, the joint lowest for the survey, although for 2024 the loss of 6 Rook pairs was a major contributor to this. Other negatives included falls in the numbers of 'red-listed' Common Whitethroat and Song Thrush, whilst Pheasant fell to just a single pair. On the plus side, species that reached record numbers included Woodpigeon, Chiffchaff, Robin, and the UK-vulnerable Linnet. The continuing presence of Grasshopper Warbler and the first record of Barn Owl were also notable and underline yet again how importance of these 'micro' sites.

Remarkably, given its linear profile, small size, and fragmented habitat, as well as its heavy daily footfall, as this fieldwork continues to show, Skerne Wood is home to an abundant variety of birds. This survey plays a vital role in supporting the future of the site and guiding its ongoing management and long-term preservation as a valuable 'green' asset for Sedgefield.

Acknowledgments

Members of the Woodland group and everyone else who have contributed to the site are recognised for their hard work in creating a superb wildlife habitat in Sedgefield for everyone to enjoy. Thank you also to Brian Clasper and Rudolf Reichal for the brilliant bird images and Melissa Hinton for the signboard image.

References

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- <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/>
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- Woodland & Wildlife – Sedgefield Facebook site

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