



A project of Sedgefield Development Trust

Skerne Wood @ NETPark



**Common Bird Census
Report 2025
Dr Frederick S. Milton**

THE 2025 COMMON BIRD CENSUS

Skerne Wood @ NETPark

Woodland and Wildlife Community Woodland, Sedgefield

Introduction

During March to June 2025, the fifth annual breeding bird census 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.



The Pine Wood is a superb habitat. Although it is only a small plantation, in 2025 it attracted a wide variety of bird species including Stock Dove, Kestrel, Crossbill and Goldcrest
(Frederick Milton)

Front Cover – male Bullfinch – a record year for the species (Brian Clasper)

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 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 Sedgefield 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.



A thick display of Snowdrop in March, emphasising the excellent spring weather. The tangle of scrub habitat is excellent for Wren and many other species (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 remnant ‘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 block-planted in 3 phases, the most

recent being a mixed species hedgerow in 2021. Several footpaths traverse the site. Habitat work in 2025 was again minimal, scything of grasslands, path maintenance and some small-scale tree planting. Some grass areas were left un-mown, allowing herbage and a small wetland area to develop. This, in turn, attracted good numbers of insects attracted to the flowering plants.



Salters Lane Wood on the east of the site is home to an extensive rookery (Frederick Milton)

NETPark has been further developed since 2023, leading to the loss of the northwest corner of Skerne Woods. However, during 2025 the site offices were removed and the corner of the site restored to grassland which will slowly regenerate. The hedge that was planted in 2021 has not been as badly damaged as first feared and it should quickly regrow and form an important habitat. The addition of a small number of SUDs ponds within the new phase of NETPark may attract a wider number of birds to Skerne Woods. Mallard and Moorhen have already been recorded on these small water bodies.



It was a record year for Skerne Woods' Robins (Brian Clasper)

Site Visits 2025

Ten visits were carried out in March to June. All were undertaken 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	08.03.25	0630-0830	Sunny, Wind nil, Warm 8-11C	Bird activity high
B	16.03.25	0645-0845	Sunny, Wind light NE Cold 3-5C	Moderate bird activity
C	28.03.25	0600-0730	Sunny Spells, Wind light NW. Mild 7-11C	Moderate bird activity
D	06.04.25	0630-0815	Sunny, Wind nil. Frost at first. Cold 3-5C	Moderate bird activity
E	17.04.25	0630-0800	Sunny, Wind light NW. 6-10C	Moderate bird activity
F	26.04.25	0630-0815	Cloudy Wind nil. 6-8C	Moderate bird activity.
G	10.05.25	0630-0815	Sunny, Wind nil, Warm 7-12C	High bird activity
H	18.05.25	0630-0800	Cloudy, Wind nil, 8C	Moderate bird activity Public event
J	28.05.25	0545-0745	Cloudy. Wind nil. Mild 11-13C	High bird activity
K	07.06.2025	0600-0745	Cloudy, Wind nil. Cool. 7-11C Rain towards end.	Moderate 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 high pressure and very dry conditions, that marked it as being the warmest and sunniest spring on record, with the summer also being the warmest for the UK.¹ This uniform and largely settled weather resulted in excellent survey conditions, a slightly earlier start to the census year and no abandoned or postponed fieldwork. This was in complete contrast to the previous year when persistent wet weather constantly interrupted the survey season. Despite the seemingly benign 2025 spring weather, this may impacted on the success of bird breeding. The long and very dry spring led to a noticeably less insects, particularly mosquitos that rely upon wet pools, towards mid-summer and a definite reduction in

¹ Seasonal Assessment – Spring 2025. Available at: <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/weather/learn-about/uk-past-events/summaries/seasonal-assessment---spring-2025.pdf>; Seasonal Assessment – Summer 2025. Available at: <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/weather/learn-about/uk-past-events/summaries/seasonal-assessment---summer-25.pdf>

gastropods (snails and slugs). This lack of available food may have impacted bird breeding, particularly species such as Blackbird and Song Thrush, as gastropods form a major part of their diets. A total of 17.5 hours fieldwork was carried out, a slight increase on the previous year's surveying that had been constantly interrupted by heavy rain.

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 prevented further destruction to the front of boxes, but not to the sides, leading to 2 boxes being replaced. Four specialist 'large' boxes for Kestrel and Stock Dove are also in situ.

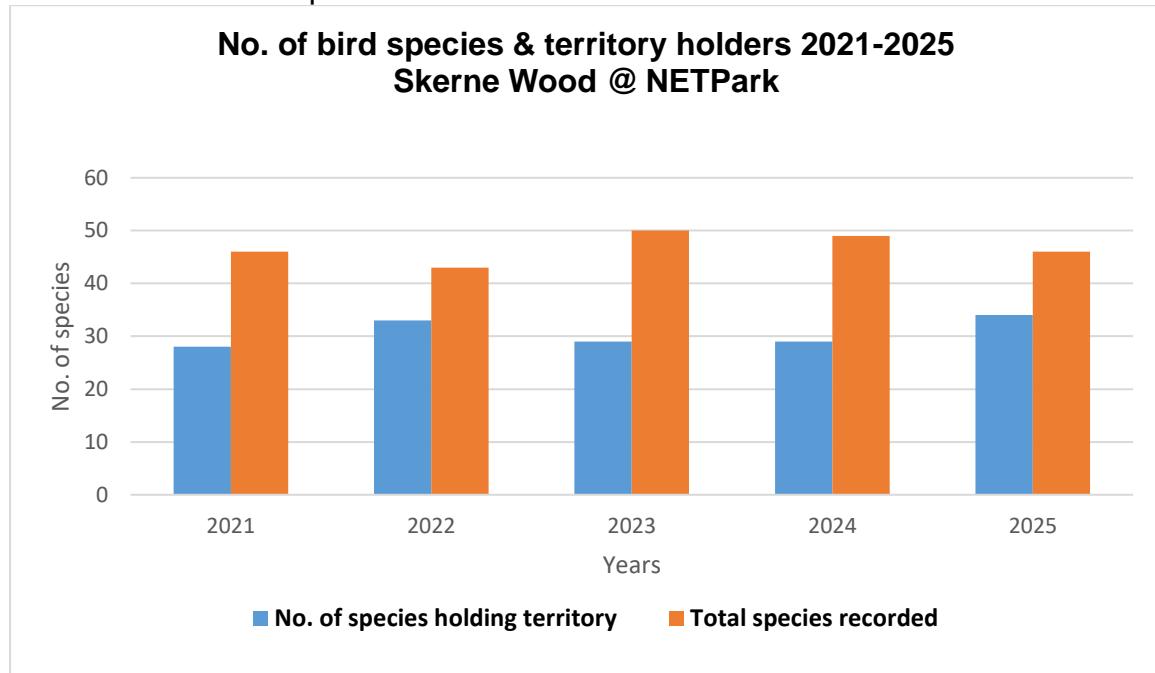


Robin nest in a nest box (Frederick Milton)

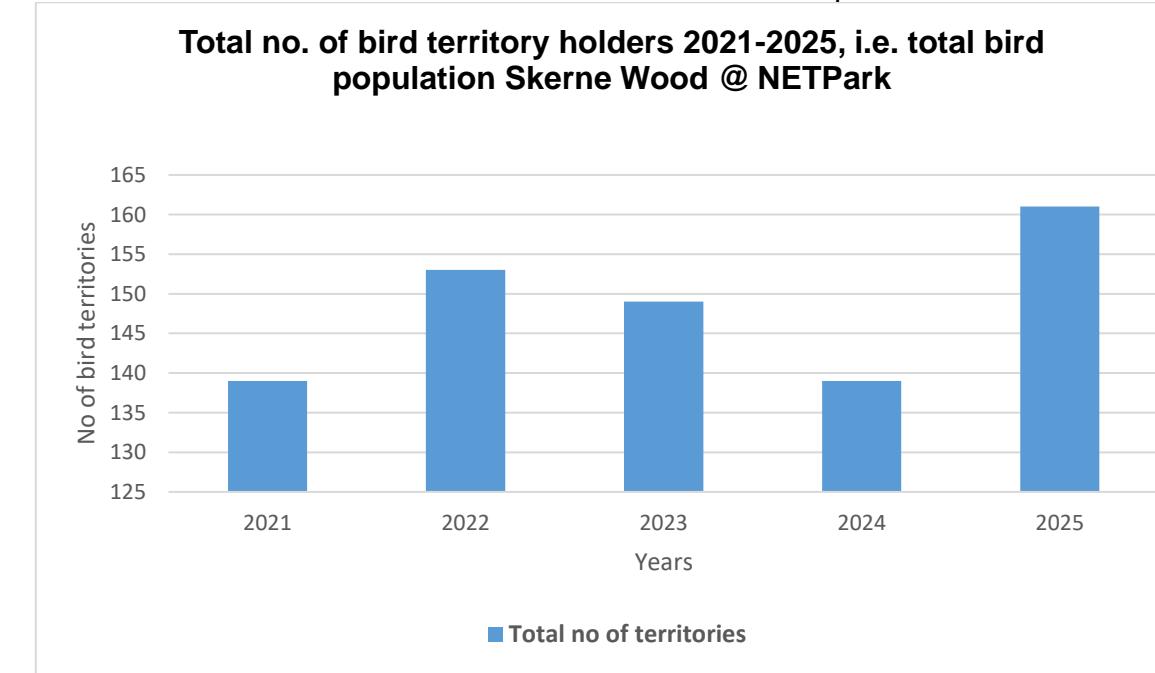
The boxes were not inspected this year, although both Great Tit and Blue Tit were seen to use several of boxes and Robin also occupied a box for only the second time. Of the larger boxes, one was used by Kestrel, Jackdaws again nested in another box and Stock Dove also occupied a box in the Pine Wood.

Results of the 2024 Common Bird Census

A total of 46 bird species were recorded during the 2025 CBC., although for the first time in the 5 years of the survey, no new species were recorded, despite the superb surveying conditions. The number of species recorded during CBC fieldwork 2021-2025 remains at 74 species.



Despite no new species being added, 2025 was a record year for species holding territory. A total of 34 species held at least one territory during fieldwork. Another new record was also established. The 'total bird population' jumped to an all-time high of 161 pairs of birds. The previous highest total was in 2022, when 153 pairs were estimated. Possible reasons for this are discussed in the species accounts below.



Ducks to Woodpeckers

Shelduck was again recorded in April in neighbouring fields. **Mallard** was noted on 6 occasions, with pair also seen at the Pond. Given this, a territory was mapped, the first for the site. Two pairs of **Pheasant** were recorded, an increase from the single pairs in 2024. A **Stock Dove** pair used the nestbox in the Pine Wood, although actual breeding was not proven. **Woodpigeon** numbers yet again increased to another site record of 12 pairs as the species continues its rise in numbers. For the first time, two pairs of **Collared Dove** were mapped, with birds in the Salters Lane Wood and the Sycamores in the centre of the site. The only wader species was **Oystercatcher**, with 'piping' birds noted on several occasions over the site and in adjacent fields.



'No-mow' grassland in the centre of the site, with wildflowers starting to appear & small wetland patch beginning to form – both promising micro habitats (Frederick Milton)

Three species of birds of prey were noted. A single pair of **Kestrel** has been a constant since the survey began in 2021, and once again a pair held territory in the Pine Wood, although breeding was not confirmed. A single **Sparrowhawk** was seen in May. **Buzzard** was mapped twice but had insufficient occurrence to prove territory holding. Whilst **Hobby** was again seen on several times around Sedgefield and Bishop Middleham, it still hasn't been recorded on the Skerne Wood census, though it's surely only a matter of time! **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was not recorded, but damage to the boxes, suggests that birds were present on site sometime during the 2025 spring/summer.

Crows to Warblers

Four species of crows were recorded. **Jackdaw** moved their nesting site from the Pine Wood to the box in the Sycamores in the centre of the site. **Magpie** numbers rose slightly from just 2 pairs in 2024 to 3 pairs. **Rook** remains the commonest breeding CBC bird. Numbers are calculated by the number of active nests that are very visible in the Salter Lane Woodlands. It was pleasing that Rook numbers recovered from the all-time low of 22 active nests in 2024 to 26 nests this year, despite constant disturbance by users of the heavily used bike track below 'our' rookeries. After reaching a record low of just a single pair in the previous year, **Carrion Crow** numbers slightly increased to 2 pairs.

Coal Tit is another 'ever present' with a single pair yet again in the Pine Wood. **Blue Tit** numbers reached a record number of 11 pairs, whilst **Great Tit** dipped slightly to 4 pairs. Both species were seen using the boxes. For the first time since 2022 **Long Tailed Tit** held territory.

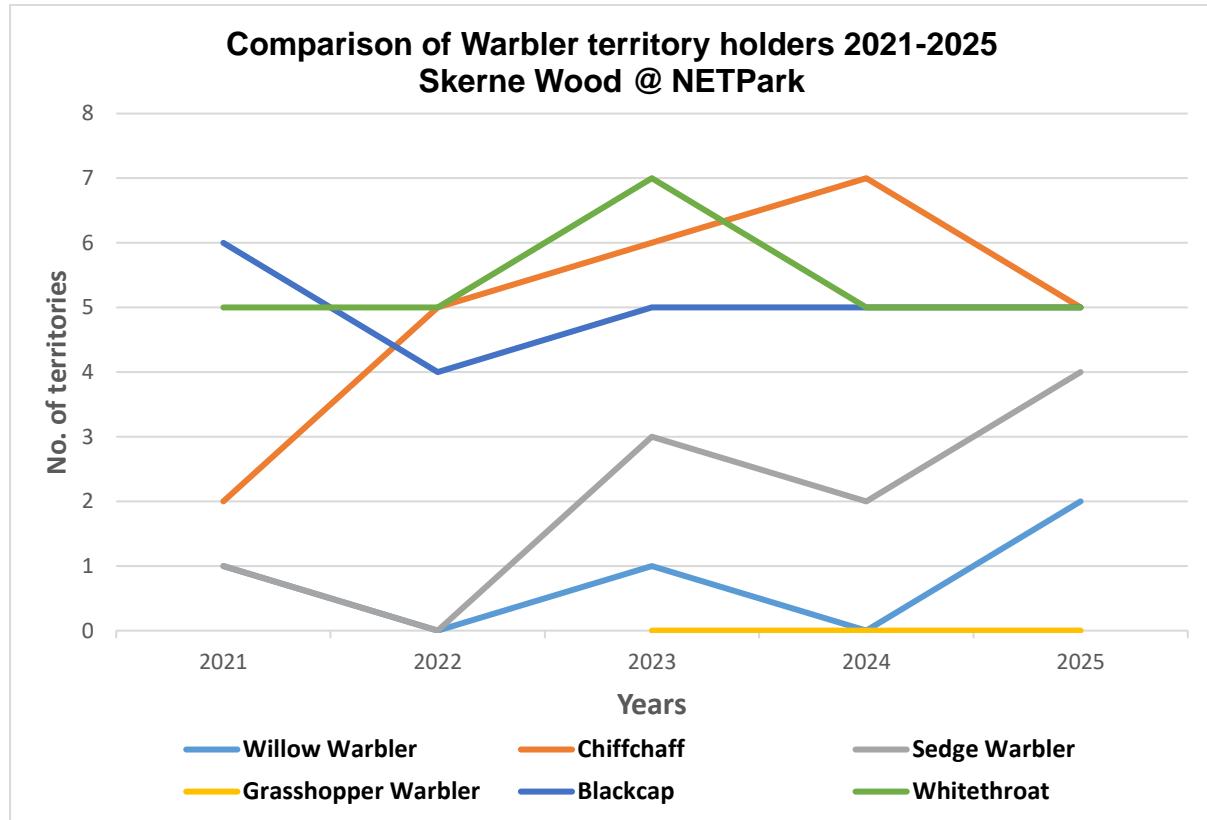


Grey Wagtail (Brian Clasper)

A singing **Skylark** was recorded on just one occasion, in June. The restoration of the site in its previously favoured area on the northwest border of the site, may see it return as a territory holder in 2026. **Swallow** was seen on several dates, with birds probably breeding in surrounding farmsteads.

Warbler species had a generally good year. Of note was the return of **Willow Warbler** as a territory holder. Single territories were mapped in 2021 and then again in 2023, but in 2025, two pairs were recorded, both in the centre of the site. After an inexorable rise from just 2 pairs in 2021 to 7 pairs in 2024, **Chiffchaff** numbers fell slightly to 5 pairs this year. Was the increase in Willow Warbler numbers a factor as both species favour similar habitats? **Sedge Warbler** had an excellent year, with a record 4 pairs mapped all along the weedy fields on the site's northern boundary. Nationally, the species has undergone a slight population rise since 2020.² For the third year running, **Grasshopper Warbler** was heard 'reeling' in the weedy fields on the northern boundary but moved from its previous favoured site adjacent Hardwick Grange to the boundary opposite the Pine Wood. It was only heard singing on 2 dates, insufficient evidence to prove territory holding. **Blackcap** numbers remained static at 5 pairs for the third consecutive year. Similarly, **Common Whitethroat** also remained constant at 5 pairs in 2024 and 2025.

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



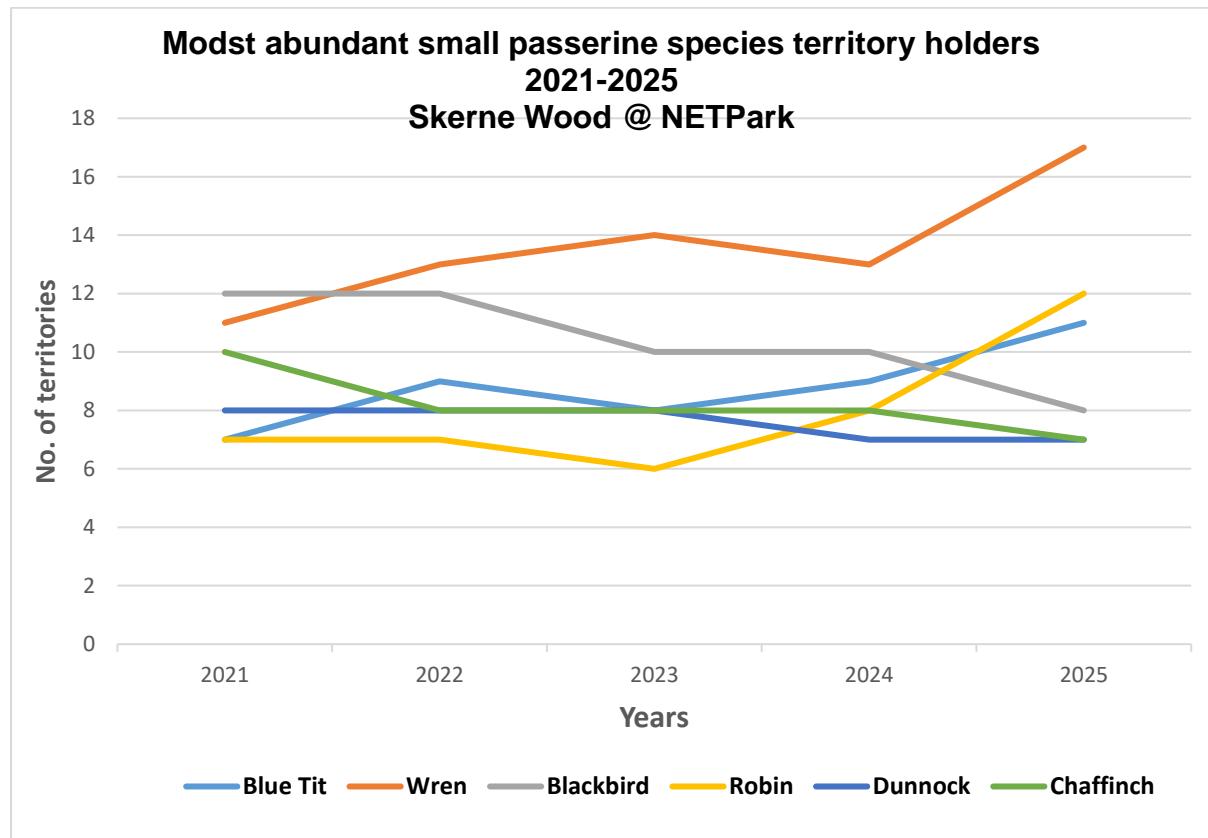
Crests to Buntings

The mild winter weather enabled **Goldcrest** numbers to remain stable at 2 pairs, with birds in the Pine Wood location and again in Salters Lane Wood. Another species hit hard by cold weather is Wren. Like Goldcrest, the 2024-25 mild winter apparently aided Wren numbers, with the population reaching an all-time high of 17 pairs. This cemented its status as the second commonest bird on site. There was just a single sighting of **Treecreeper** this year. There were contrasting fortunes for the 3 resident thrush species. **Song Thrush** numbers remained static at 4 pairs and a single **Mistle Thrush** pair were present for the fifth consecutive year. However, there was a noticeable decline in **Blackbird** numbers, with drop to 8 just pairs. Possible factors may have been the change of habitat of leaving some grass areas unmown as the species likes short grass for feeding and there were noticeable fewer registrations of birds in this area. The dry spring may have also led to a lack of available food. However, of more concern is the recent appearance of a mosquito-borne virus affecting the species in England. First detected in the UK in London in summer 2020, *Usutu Virus* is potentially fatal to Blackbirds and now concerns are growing as the virus appears to have started to spread across south-east England. To find out more about this, the BTO have conducted Blackbird surveys, although results are still at an early stage.³ In contrast, **Robin** numbers again increased to a record 12 pairs, a 100% increase since 2023. Again, it is likely that the mild winter boosted this species too as the BTO sees Robin numbers strongly correlated to fluctuations in winter conditions.

³ https://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/bird_table_121_-_blackbirds_in_gardens.pdf

Nationally, the species has undergone a 55% increase in the period 1967 to 2023 with an approximate 7.8 million Robin territories estimated in the UK in 2016.⁴

As the survey is now into its fifth year, a growing amount of data is being compiled to illustrate the trends for different species. The contrast between Wren and Blackbird is quite striking.



Tree Sparrow (Brian Clasper)

⁴ <https://www.bto.org/learn/about-birds/birdfacts/robin>

A single **Tree Sparrow** pair was mapped in the Pine Wood, and it is probable that they used one of the boxes. This was the first year since 2022 that a territory was proven. There was no change in **Dunnock** numbers for the second successive year, 7 pairs were spread across the site. After only being recorded once on the survey in 2022, it was a surprise this year that a single **Grey Wagtail** territory was mapped. Birds were heard singing at the site entrance on Charles Merz Way, then a juvenile was seen being fed by adults in June in the same area. Breeding was possibly in one of the adjacent industrial units. After 4 years as an 'ever present' single pair, although **Pied Wagtail** was recorded in 2025, there was not enough registrations for a territory to be mapped.



Crossbill male & juvenile (Brian Clasper)

Chaffinch numbers underwent a small dip to 7 pairs, their lowest over 5 years of the survey. In contrast, **Bullfinch** increased to a record 3 pairs, with birds in the Pine Wood, centre of the site and Salters Lane Wood. Nationally, both finch species are in decline, so it is worth close-monitoring Chaffinch numbers especially. Chaffinch declines have been linked to the epidemic of *Trichomonosis* that had first hit Greenfinch. Nationally, Chaffinch numbers have undergone a five-year decline of 20%. The overall UK trend for Bullfinch in 1995–2023 shows a decline of 15%, with the picture for England alarmingly down by nearly 40% since 2018.⁵ **Greenfinch** was recorded but no territory was mapped. **Linnet** again had a good year, maintaining the 4 pairs recorded from the year before, with all birds along the 'scrubby' northern boundary, underlining again the importance of this 'marginal' habitat. Likewise, **Goldfinch** numbers also remained stable at 4 pairs for the second year running. **Crossbill** was recorded for only the second time, with birds heard calling in the Pine Wood. These were likely to be post-breeding dispersal birds having bred locally. After 'hanging on' last year with a single sighting, sadly this was the first year that **Yellowhammer** wasn't recorded. The restoration of the northwest corner of the site where Yellowhammer previously held territory in 2021, may see the species return soon. For the fifth successive year, a single **Reed Bunting** was mapped on the northern boundary hedgerow.

⁵ BTO (2025) *The Breeding Bird Survey 2024 incorporating the Waterways Breeding Bird Survey Population trends of the UK's breeding birds*. Available at: <https://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/BBS-Report-2024.pdf>

Summary

2025 was an excellent year for the birds of Skerne Wood. Good surveying conditions throughout the fieldwork year enabled relatively high numbers to be mapped as birds are obviously far more active and in song during good weather than the damp and cold conditions of 2024. Although no new species were seen in 2025, 2 new species held territory for the first time, underlining the site's importance. Despite seemingly productive fieldwork, the total number of species recorded fell to 46 species, although on the plus side the 'total bird population' (the sum of all the number of bird territories) increased to a record 161 pairs of birds. Contributing to this were record numbers of Woodpigeon, Robin, Wren, Blue Tit, Bullfinch, Sedge Warbler and Willow Warbler. The mild winter of 2024-25 must be seen as a factor for boosting numbers of the first 4 resident species. The only real negatives for the year were the fall in the numbers of Blackbird and Chaffinch, as well as the absence of Yellowhammer. The continuing presence of Grasshopper Warbler, and a further 5 species of Warbler holding territory, underline yet again the importance of this 'micro' site.

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 for the brilliant bird images.

References

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- Woodland & Wildlife – Sedgefield Facebook site

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