

NATURAL HISTORY OF THE PARISH

BIRDS A detailed study of the bird communities of Hilton Parish was undertaken during 1972-73. The results revealed a total of 4~ breeding species occupying 1225 territories, over half of which were concentrated in the village. Compared with the surrounding farmland, the village (13⁰/₀ of the Parish by area) attracts relatively large numbers of breeding birds because of the variety of habitats on offer. Since 1973 some aspects of the bird community have undergone considerable change because of habitat loss. In the village 7 housing developments have swallowed up large areas of meadow and hedgerow. The character of farmland has been transformed, and hedgerow destruction plus the loss of trees to Dutch elm disease has also made an impact on some species. Corn Buntings (26 territories in 1973) now appear to have been completely lost as a breeding species. Skylarks now occupy well under half of the 177 territories recorded in 1973. Thrushes, finches and even House Sparrows have declined in numbers, whilst Collared Doves, taking advantage of the large amount of grain available, appear to be on the increase. As in 1973 the Parish still hosts 1-2 pairs of Tawny and Little Owl, Kestrel and Jay. Kingfisher (not recorded in 1973) recently bred along West Brook and Sparrowhawks (exterminated by toxic chemicals in the 1960s) have now staged a comeback and have bred regularly since 1985. Perhaps the greatest increase since 1973 has been shown by Magpies which now breed widely in the Parish. If non-breeding birds are also included, a total of nearly 150 species have now been recorded in or flying over the Parish, including Red-throated Diver, Fulmar, Brent Goose, Osprey, Peregrine, Dotterel, Arctic Skua, Crossbill and even an extreme rarity, a Black-winged Pratincole, from the Russian steppes.

MAMMALS 20 species have been recorded within the Parish, the more unusual including Muntjac Deer, Mink, Stoat, Harvest Mouse and Pygmy Shrew. Foxes, Badgers and Hares are regular breeders whilst the Water Vole, greatly reduced in numbers nationally, is still to be found along West Brook and in the village.

AMPHIBIANS / REPTILES Frogs have staged a major comeback as suitable village and garden ponds host these species. The rare Great Crested Newt has been recorded although its present status is unknown. Grass Snakes, attracted by large numbers of frogs and toads in some of the ponds, have also been observed.

FISH Occasionally Pike large enough to take ducklings have been reported in the village ponds. Eels have also been noted and in the streams a variety of the smaller species have been observed providing meals for the visiting Herons.

INSECTS With an increasing number of garden ponds within the village it is hardly surprising that 13 species of dragonfly have been noted. These range from the small Blue Damselflies to the impressive Broad-bodied Chaser. The succession of hot summers has also resulted in increasing numbers of Hornets some undoubtedly originating from a nest in the Village Hall. A total of 22 species of butterflies have been recorded including the White-letter Hairstreak (reduced in numbers by Dutch elm disease). The profusion of flowers in the garden of Louis King has attracted 21 of these species, including a rarity, the Clouded Yellow.

PLANTS Records of 248 species of wild flowering plants were made in a survey in the 1970s. Although no recent surveys have been undertaken, it is probable that there are now fewer species. Botanically the richest areas are still within the village. The Green alone has produced a list of 50 species (including grasses, shrubs and trees), its ancient grasslands supporting one rarity, Goldilocks, as well as particularly fine stands of Cowslips. The greatest variety of plants is shown in the areas which are less frequently mown.