

## SONGBIRD BREEDING CENSUS

This spring I carried out a (pilot) survey of breeding songbirds by mapping singing males, spending at total of 30-40 hrs in the field from mid March to mid June.

I covered almost the whole of the Fen, the exception being the western side of compartments 1-4, (Verrall's/Malcarse) which is not immediately accessible. Some areas were covered better than others i.e. received more visits particularly the Sedge Fen which had to be crossed to get anywhere else!

Preconceived notions that birdsong is restricted to hours after dawn and before dusk proved false. Although for many individuals this might be the case, for others singing could be recorded even at lunchtime. Thus visits at different times of the day proved just as useful although the majority of visits were within four hours of sunrise or four hours of sunset.

Another preconceived notion that proved false was that I assumed that if I concentrated on the resident species early in the season, I could return to the summer visitors later. Sadly by late May many of the summer visitors, having paired, were not very vocal. This means that while the quality of the data for the resident species is mostly very good, the quality for summer visitors, with the exception of Willow Warbler, is poor. Some species, among both groups (e.g. Dunnock, Blackcap, Garden Warbler) proved elusive and I failed to discover any pattern for the timing of their song, it seemed to me to be totally random, thus the counts for these species are unrepresentative.

Where the data quality is acceptable the results suggest the following number of breeding pairs (based on my actual counts in brackets and extrapolating for the uncounted areas): Wren 150 prs (122), Robin 150 prs (125), Blackbird 80-90 prs (66), Song Thrush 12 prs (12), Whitethroat 15 (10), Willow Warbler 150 prs (94), Chiffchaff 30 prs (22), Chaffinch 30 prs (22), Reed Bunting 30 prs (22).

Poor quality data means species such as Reed Warbler (21), Sedge Warbler (45), Blackcap (32), Garden Warbler (5) and Dunnock (13) were obviously undercounted, and the method also failed to register much contact with Blue and Great Tits. Among interesting species I counted 2 Turtle Doves, up to 4 male Cuckoos (probably more), and 2 Lesser Whitethroat.

Since most of the species covered in this survey are most naturally found in wooded habitats it is not surprising that the contact 'hot spots' were St Edmund's Fen (compartments 30-34), the whole region around the Spinney Bank/ Gallop's Field/ Brick Pits (compartments 10,11,15,20-24), and the Verrall's Fen and Malcarse wooded areas (compartments 2-5). The carr on both sides of Sedge Fen Drove was surprisingly sparsely occupied but there was a small 'hot spot' in the area surrounding Godwin's Plots. The section south of Wicken Lode (not including St Edmund's) was not very densely occupied.

My aim is to repeat the exercise in 2002 but concentrating on the summer visitors and those species that were obviously undercounted. I shall also continue to monitor both Song Thrush and Reed Bunting numbers since both appear to be recovering at Wicken.

Peter Bircham 30-6-01