



Birds at Barton Glebe in 2009.



Our site has continued to develop although ecologically it is still very young woodland. The quick growing trees such as silver birch and willows have shot up over the last couple of years and further growth of the understory of brambles and hawthorn has been noticeable. The glades are now quite well vegetated with an ever increasing diversity of plants and are mown 2/3 times a year. We have continued to monitor the birdlife regularly and I will try and summarise the main observations over the last year or so.

Phase 1.

The mature hedges bordering the 3 sides continued to hold most of the breeding birds. Up to 3 pairs of robins, wrens and blackbirds, 2 pairs of dunnocks and whitethroats and a territory holding lesser whitethroat were present this year. The commonest hedgerow birds were 6 pairs of chaffinches (the commonest breeding bird) and 5 pairs of yellowhammers. None of these species breed in our woods yet but are increasingly using the glades and woods for feeding on seeds and insects and also for song posts. The taller willow trees have been colonised by- yes! You have guessed it - willow warblers! 4 pairs sang and held territory amidst them this year and they must be regarded as the first 'bone fide' woodland bird colonising our woods. They are specialists in colonising young, developing woods. Interestingly, a pair of great tits nested under the eaves of the pine end of the Lodge and a pair of blue tits similarly at the opposite pine end. They are such opportunists! The adults could be seen endlessly flying to the hedges in search of caterpillars for their young.

The glades themselves held 2 pairs of breeding meadow pipits and for the second year running we had a 'territory holding' singing tree pipit for about a month. Breeding was not proven but it is an unusual record for Cambridgeshire. The vegetation is now too luxuriant for skylarks but they continued to sing over the Glebe whilst nesting in the surrounding farmland. Up to dozen or so goldfinches and linnets were present in small groups feeding on seed plants in the glades but they did not breed on site. We saw red-legged and grey partridges on site but there was no proof of breeding this year.

We had regular visits from a green woodpecker feeding in the glades, up to 2 kestrels hunting for voles, a sparrow hawk hunting the hedges for song birds and our first sighting of a buzzard.

Over last winter there were up to 120 fieldfares feeding on the copious supply of hawthorn berries in the hedges and there were mixed flocks of between 20 and 40 greenfinches, goldfinches, linnets, skylarks, meadow pipits and reed buntings feeding on seeds in the glades and young woods. There was a whinchat and a stonechat seen on passage too.

Phase 2.

Prior to the tree planting this autumn/winter the ground was seeded with a special grass mix. Growth was slow and the cover in summer was very open. The field held 6 pairs of breeding skylarks but the volume of their singing suggested more! Surprisingly, a pair of lapwings bred but their clutch of eggs did not hatch, probably due to the attentions of the resident magpies or carrion crows. We have a couple of pairs of each nesting in the larger trees in the hedges around the Glebe. Red legged and grey partridges, pheasants, wood pigeons used the field extensively and towards the end of 2009 there was a spectacular flock of about 80 goldfinches feeding on the weed seeds in the company of some 20 skylarks. Such a large 'charm' of gold finches is remarkable these days. The rather 'gappy' hedges surrounding the field held 2 further pairs of breeding yellow hammers and a pair of whitethroats.

My favourite Barton bird.

It just has to be the yellowhammer (or yellow bunting). They are present every time I visit. The males have bright 'canary yellow' heads and breasts and are to be seen singing from the tallest trees in the hedges and increasingly in our developing woods. The females are browner and streakier. I have to use my imagination to make their song fit the 'little bit of bread and no cheese' scansion as described in the field guides. They nest on the ground in long grass quite near to their song posts. . Over the last 25 years or so breeding yellow hammers have declined by over 50% nationwide and are now a red listed species 'of conservation concern' to our national authorities. We seem to have a fairly stable population of about 7 pairs of breeding birds on our land over the last 3 years, over all and they seem to be thriving. That really gladdens my heart.

Dr Gareth Thomas. Trustee.