

Wealden Heaths Breeding Bird Survey (West Sussex)

Results Summary 2025

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The following is a summary of the individual target species and a brief comment on several other species considered to be relevant. The surveyors are asked to note males holding territory, record them within the sites 1km squares and provide a map. The aim is to gather data over a long period to assess population trends and assist site landowners, managers and researchers. The results are also entered into the SOS database.

The 10 heathlands within this survey have been monitored since 1998 (Iping and Stedham are treated as separate heaths), plus the later additions of Broad Halfpenny and Graffham Commons. These two latter sites are not recorded on the attached graphs but are reported separately: details on request.

There are five target species, **Nightjar** *Caprimulgus europaeus*, **Woodlark** *Lullula arborea*, **Dartford Warbler** *Curruca undata*, **Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis*, and **Stonechat** *Saxicola rubicola*. The further species noted in the survey are not considered heathland specialists, but they do regularly occupy the habitat.

Additionally, 2025 was the year of the latest British Trust of Ornithology (BTO) **Heathland Birds survey** concentrating on Nightjar, Woodlark and Dartford Warbler. Surveyors were also asked to note further species, those relevant to the WHBBS were Hobby, Woodcock, Tree Pipit, Stonechat, Redstart & Linnet. All the WHBBS surveyors participated in the BTO survey and were, for some sites, assisted by staff and volunteers from the South Downs National Park and the National Trust. We are grateful for their help.

Weather. General Trends (Jan–Aug 2025) South-East England

Mild Winter: January and February were warmer than average, with fewer frost days and above-normal rainfall due to Atlantic storm systems. Dry Spring: March through May saw below-average rainfall, leading to dry soils and early signs of drought in some areas. Record-Breaking Summer: June to August was exceptionally warm, culminating in the warmest summer on record for the UK.

Nightjar

A migratory species, the first birds arrive late April with the bulk following in the first half of May. The mean arrival date for Sussex is 8th May. The record breaking 68 territories of last year was broken with 77 territories this year. This result may have been assisted by the extra effort taken for the BTO survey. The highest single count was of 19 at Ambersham/Heyshott Commons followed by Woolbeding (16), Lavington/Duncton Commons (11), Black Down (10) and Iping with seven. Although all sites reported the species the latter two, together with Graffham Common, East & West (4) were slightly lower than 2024. Black Down, Lynchmere and Iping reported leisure pressures, principally dog walking with some off leads.

Woodlark

A total of 48 territories were recorded (44 in 2024) with all but Stedham being occupied. Numbers varied between three and nine territories. The highest counts were of nine each on Woolbeding and Iping followed by Ambersham & Heyshott with seven. As long as

management continues on the sites providing bare areas and cut heather allied with control of bracken and *Molinia* it appears we have a stable population in West Sussex. They will of course also breed in forestry areas particularly where there is new planting after clearance. They are also often heard sing on their looping circular routes over stubble fields, although as yet I have not received evidence of breeding.

Dartford Warbler

As a resident often over wintering on the heathlands the trend of milder winters has enabled the population to slowly continue to increase although numbers have not yet reached the level prior to the collapse caused by the winter of 2010/11. The total of 51 territories (40 in 2024) is the highest since 2008 with only Lynchmere/Stanley (surprisingly) and Lords Piece/Coates having negative returns. The usual heaths provided the highest numbers, Ambersham/Heyshott ten, Lavington Common/Plantation nine and Iping Common eight. Encouragingly Chapel Common recorded seven despite the summer fire, (the area burned affected particularly the Redstart and Tree Pipit breeding habitat). Preferring mature heather and gorse areas, contrasting with the lower cuts preferred by Nightjar and Woodlark, shows the importance, particularly on smaller heaths, of retaining a mosaic of different species and growth levels.

Tree Pipit

A migratory species wintering in the humid zone of West Africa it is the only one of the priority species that has shown a meaningful declining trend over the 28 years. 18 were recorded from five sites compared with 23 in 2024. During the first few years of the survey over 50 were recorded regularly, from 2006, there was a steep decline until 2010 after which the population appears to have stabilised averaging just over 20 territories per year. BTO Bird facts notes a UK -8% decline (1995-2023) with a notable contraction from the south, south-east and eastern counties but a mild expansion into Scotland, possibly indicating the effects of climate change,

Stonechat

A mainly resident species, benefitting from milder winters, they can be found on the heaths throughout the year. 49 were recorded in 2025 and although less than the 60 territories in 2024 the species has prospered since a collapse in numbers due to the severe 2010/11 winter. Recorded on nine of the ten heaths, eight reported between four and seven territories, there was an exceptional high count from Woolbeding Common of 16. Lynchmere/Stanley Common was negative.

Non-priority species

Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* a total of 15 roding birds were recorded from seven of the heaths. Since a collapse in numbers in 2010 the species has stabilised at between 10 and 15 per year.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas* the 20 reported was three higher than 2024. The indication is of a stable population of between 15 and 20 territories over the ten heathlands. They are mainly reliant on standing timber with nest holes particularly at the heath edges.

Green Woodpecker's *Picus viridis* a count of 13 was the lowest since 1998 The species continues to decline on the WHBBS heathlands .

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus major* a count of 32 mirrored exactly 2024. The population appears to have stabilised between 30 and 35 per year.

Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* Lynchmere/Stanley Commons (3), Black Down (3) and Ambersham/Heyshott (2) were the only sites reporting the species.

Whitethroat *Curruca communis* (35) and **Linnet** *Linaria cannabina* (59) Stable populations.

Siskin *Spinus spinus* 8 Territories There were no reports of breeding **Lesser Redpoll** *Acanthis cabaret*

Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* a poor year with three territories reported from three sites.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*, 44 territories reported from five sites. Yet again Woolbeding had a high count of 30.(29 in 2024).

Reed Bunting *Emberiza pusilla* A scarce breeder on the heathlands. Two sites Lavington Plantation and Coates/Lords Piece reported one and three respectively although Broad Halfpenny an adjoining site not included in the main survey recorded three.

After a single record in 2024 of **Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur* there was no positive report this year, however an addition to the survey was of Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* found on Coates/Lords Piece.

My thanks to all of the surveyors who participate and contribute to the survey resulting in 28 years of valuable data.

If more data is required to assist management on individual sites, then contact Alan Perry aledgehill@outlook.com. More information regarding the history of the survey including a 25 year (1998-2022) comprehensive paper with detailed comment on the individual heaths, can be found by accessing the Sussex Ornithological Society website <https://www.sos.org.uk/> follow to "Surveys" and "Wealden Heaths Breeding Bird Survey".