

# One square kilometre, one thousand hours.

Studying the birds in a small area

Jeff Clarke

**© 2017 Jeffrey L. Clarke**

All rights reserved.

This publication is intended to be freely available. If provided in a printed format, only the reasonable costs of printing and distribution should be chargeable.

The right of Jeffrey L. Clarke to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

## Preface

Like many birdwatchers I have often put my efforts on studying an area close to where I live. My current “home patch” is comparatively small at only one square kilometre and after four years I have now spent over 1000 hours of watching the birds there.

I thought that this would be a good time to document my experiences in the hope that there may be readers who could find something of interest here. I have tried to avoid technical and scientific terms as much as possible.

Jeff Clarke    November 2017

## Contents

Chapter 1 – The location.....	1
Chapter 2 – A description of the area .....	5
Chapter 3 – Past observations.....	11
Chapter 4 – Current observations.....	13
Chapter 5 – Keeping long term records.....	15
Chapter 6 - Understanding the landscape .....	19
Chapter 7 – Species details .....	21
Chapter 8 – Additional experiences.....	36
Chapter 9 – The future.....	38
<i>Appendix 1 - Other fauna and flora.</i> .....	40
<i>Postscript</i> .....	42
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	43

## List of Maps

Map 1	Map showing the location relative to Manchester, Altrincham and Warrington .....	1
Map 2	Map showing the location within Carrington Moss.....	1
Map 3	Large scale map of the area .....	2
Map 4	Google view of the area showing the limited extent of woodland. ....	2
Map 5	Map showing field numbers .....	3
Map 6	Map showing the extent of Carrington Moss in 1856 .....	3
Map 7	The Tithe map of 1839 showing old woodland areas.....	4

## List of Tables

Table 1	Total species count by month.....	15
Table 2	Records of the rarest species (recorded only once) by month .....	16
Table 3	Other rare species occurrences by month.....	16
Table 4	Uncommon species occurrences by month.....	17

## Introduction

Many birdwatchers have a “local patch” where they note the birds which occur there. This area can be anything from a small garden to a large region of many square miles. Watching even the smallest area regularly will show that no two days will be the same, and that sometimes there will be birds that could never have been predicted.

With enough time, rare birds can be seen anywhere and even in the most unlikely areas. I have seen Red Kite, Crossbill, Whooper Swan, Hawfinch and Fulmar fly over my suburban house but this is over a period of almost thirty years. Only the last two of these are truly rare in this area, whilst the others could eventually be expected to occur at some time, even if maybe less than annually. I have also seen Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Red-legged Partridge in my small garden. I cannot decide which of these is actually rarer; to me both are equally unlikely! This shows that wherever one is there is always the chance of something totally unexpected.

To me recording the birds in a “local patch” is one of the foundations of birdwatching. Regularly watching common birds is one of the easier routes to gaining some familiarity of their habits and variability. With a good knowledge of the more common birds, unfamiliar ones will often be less difficult to identify.

For over fifty years I studied several home patches which were within walking distance from home. I moved to South Manchester in 1978 and then watched the Mersey Valley area between Stretford and Chorlton. At that time it was a brilliant area for a beginner like me. Since then this area has changed and the birds present have also changed. The most significant events have been as follows:

1. The rubbish tips at Stretford and Chorlton closed in the 1980's. This meant that the regular sightings of Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were gone forever.
2. Prior to the early 1980's Sale Water Park was quite undisturbed. Water skiing was then introduced and any visiting water birds usually left quickly, rather than staying for some several days which formerly occurred.
3. Broad Ees Dole at Sale Water Park was a haven for wetland birds with breeding Redshanks and large numbers of wintering Snipe and at least 20 Jack Snipe. In the early 1980's this area was developed into a managed nature reserve. The Redshanks then left and Snipe numbers dropped. These losses were initially offset by some very good migrant birds such as Temminck's Stint and the first Little Egret in Greater Manchester. However these migrants only occurred whilst the water level was well controlled. Within four years, financial pressures forced the management of the area to cease. This area is now much poorer and ignored by many birders.
4. Chorlton Water Park used to be a site of national importance for wintering Pochard, with flocks of over a thousand in daylight hours. At night these birds went to feed at Salford Docks. In the late 1980's the waters of the docks were aerated in preparation for the Commonwealth Games. This coincided with the almost total loss of birds feeding there and the number of birds at Chorlton also dropped. Any count of over 20 Pochard at Chorlton would now be regarded as unusual.

A few locally breeding birds have now vanished. Until about 1986 Corn Buntings were common and probably breeding on Stretford Ees. There was a large overnight roost of at least 40 birds in a hawthorn hedge at Sale Water Park which they shared with Fieldfares. Tree Sparrows were abundant and the largest flock ever recorded in Greater Manchester (of 150) was at Chorlton in March 1977. Flocks of up to 30 persisted there until at least 1984. Double figures of wintering Water Pipits were regular at Sale Water Park in the early 1980's but these are now rarely recorded anywhere in Greater Manchester. All of these are now history and are long gone. Some bird populations are highly dynamic and the losses here may just turn out to be gains for elsewhere.

For me, there were also major errors made in the long-term planning for this area. To me the most significant was in planting too many trees. This proved to be a problem in that Chorlton Ees changed from its long-term status of open meadows to becoming densely wooded. It thus became less suitable for grassland species and the regular wintering population of up to six Short Eared Owls moved elsewhere. The decline here had become obvious by 1990. So after ten years I gave up with this area and moved my efforts further to the west – primarily to Flixton, Urmston and Carrington Moss. This was successful for many years.

By 2000 the Urmston Meadows area had been invaded by a rampant growth of Himalayan Balsam and this meant that in the summer much of the river was no longer visible. In the past I had found that migrant waders such as Greenshank and Green Sandpipers were frequently present on the river in August. These birds probably still occur, but now would be hidden from view. If they do still visit they will now go unrecorded. There was also an increase in human activity here which coincided with the loss of Little Owl and Tree Sparrow.

I then abandoned this area and as the Flixton area had never been particularly good for me I then concentrated on the Carrington Moss area.

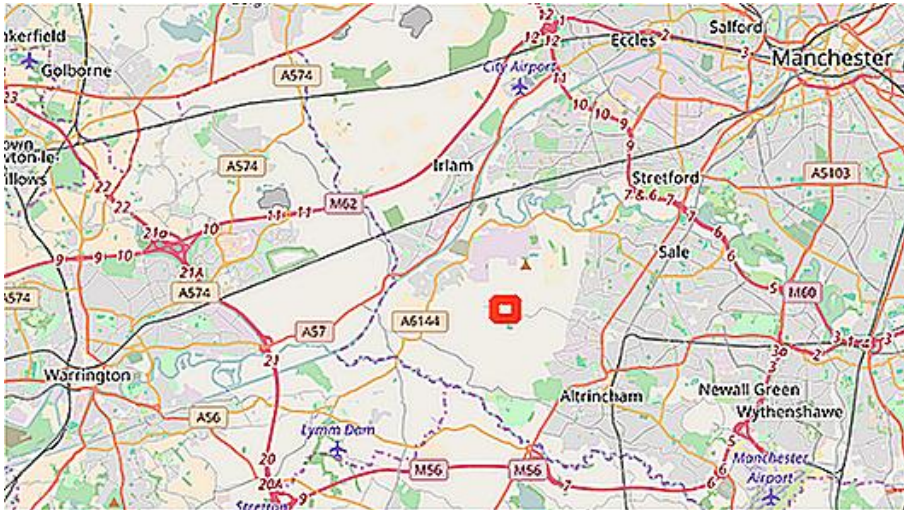
From about 2009 I covered this area entirely on foot often using public transport and settled into a good routine. However by 2012 I was having some trouble with the 10 to 15 kilometre walk from home which was needed on each visit. By using my car I could reduce this distance but to properly cover this area a lot of walking was still needed. I thought that studying a smaller area in detail would be better for me. I then hoped to find such an area where I could maintain this easier regime for many years.

I still wanted to be somewhere within the Carrington Moss area as it was both close to home and familiar to me. I also thought it better to choose an area which was not already well covered by other observers. I therefore rejected the Altrincham ETW (Effluent Treatment Works) and the Shell Pond area to the north. This still left me with many places to choose from when I noticed that the area to the north of Sinderland Green had tracks which almost coincided with the National Grid kilometre lines. It was also an area that I had visited a few times and had in the past produced some interesting birds for me. The boundaries of this area are easily defined on the ground. This seemed ideal for me and so the choice was made – the one kilometre square SJ7390. I started observations on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2013.

## Chapter 1 – The location

The area I chose to study is in the south-west of Greater Manchester, between Altrincham and Partington. In all maps the study area is highlighted in red.

It is important to note that just because something is present or labelled on a map it does not mean that it is correct. Printed maps usually have very few errors but online maps are frequently less accurate. At large scales the map on <https://www.google.co.uk> incorrectly renames Townsend Farm Lane as Sinderland Road. Similarly on [www.openstreetmap.org](https://www.openstreetmap.org) Sinderland Brook has been renamed as Fairywell Brook.



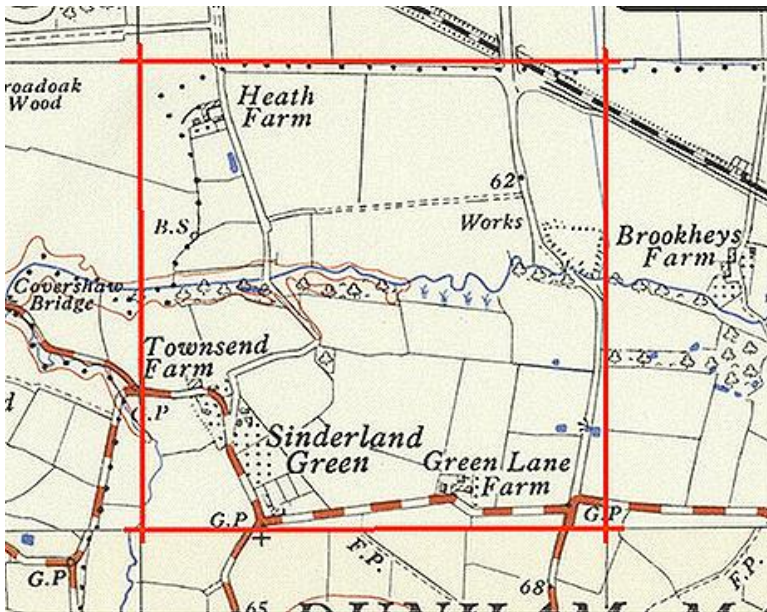
**Map 1** Map showing the location relative to Manchester, Altrincham and Warrington



**Map 2** Map showing the location within Carrington Moss.

Note that on this map Sinderland Brook is incorrectly labelled as Fairywell Brook.





**Map 3** Large scale map of the area

This is an old Ordnance Survey map probably from the 1950's or earlier and some details have now changed:

1. Heath Farm was demolished many years ago and little remains apart from an overgrown area.
2. Green Lane Farm is no longer a working farm; it is now a residential property.
3. The footpath leading south-east from Sinderland Green no longer exists.



**Map 4** Google view of the area showing the limited extent of woodland.

Map source: [www.google.co.uk/maps](http://www.google.co.uk/maps)







**Map 7                      The Tithe map of 1839 showing the extent of Sinderland Woods**

This map from 1839 shows that much of the current Sinderland Green Woods was not wooded at that date. It is only the area south of the brook and to the west of Townsend Farm Lane that can be considered truly old woodland. It also shows that the brook through the wood (since cut to a straight course) was still meandering then. The map also confirms that the tiny woodland area to the north-west of Sinderland Green (locally known as Bluebell Wood) has been wooded for at least 180 years. All other areas of existing woodland (except for Brookheys Covert) are therefore comparatively new. However to the inexperienced eye there is little difference between a one hundred year old wood and one which is much older.

Map source: <http://maps.cheshire.gov.uk/tithemaps>

## Chapter 2 – A description of the area

### The landscape

This area is typical of the Cheshire plains and has few outstanding features. This is a flat landscape of arable farmland with small areas of deciduous woodland and is also crossed by a small brook. The flat terrain with few trees means that there is good visibility in all directions and it is sometimes possible to see approaching flocks of migrating geese many minutes before they arrive.

Before the first Inclosure Act (this is the original spelling) of 1773 this was common or waste land. The area to the north was still lowland heath and Red Grouse were known to be present there well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Almost all of this area has now been modified by human activity in some way with the only exception being the two wooded areas. Brookheys covert is described as ancient semi-natural woodland. Sinderland Green Woods also has some age but has changed somewhat in the last two hundred years. According to the Cheshire tithe maps of 1836 – 1851, only the western part of these woods south of the stream was then wooded, with the rest then being open ground. Both of these areas of woodland now include substantial amounts of dead wood which is advantageous to wildlife.

Sinderland Brook is a highly meandering watercourse up to five metres wide. In dry periods it can be narrow, shallow and slow flowing. However the depth and speed of flow can increase rapidly after heavy rain. Because of its winding path there are few points where it is possible to view more than about 20 metres. The main exception is through the western part of Sinderland Green Woods where it is straight for 300 metres. Even this part is not visible in summer because of the vegetation. Maps from the 1870's show that Sinderland Brook was then still winding through the woods. Therefore this is a modern change, and the straight route was possibly cut around 1900. Apart from this there appear to have been no other alterations to the brook.

The fields are mainly used for arable farming with some small areas used for grazing. The fields are separated by hawthorn hedges in varying states of repair. Some hedges are complete and well maintained but several are degraded with only a few bushes remaining, and others have vanished entirely. There are also a few small drainage ditches. There is no permanent standing water, but a few areas remain damp in all but the driest summers. Old maps show a number of ponds, but none remain now. There is one area which may have been a pond but is now no more than a permanently damp depression. Some fields are partly flooded in wet winters.

There is a derelict railway line running across the north-east corner of this area. This line opened in 1873. Passenger services closed by 1964, but I can remember freight trains to the Carrington industrial area using this line until 1982. It is now often under water and overgrown with willows.

One of the more obvious features of this landscape is the pylons. Here they are a well-established and permanent part of the landscape. Many birds habitually use them as resting areas, and for raptors also as sites to scan for prospective prey. This kilometre square includes six pylons but there are at least thirty more easily visible from here. With a telescope it is usually possible to find a Buzzard or even an occasional Peregrine perched on one of them! Additionally, Stock Doves frequently perch on the top (earth) wire. I have so far found that any group of pigeons distantly seen perching on the earth wire always turn out to be Stock Doves. Birds do not seem to perch on the current-carrying cables. I once saw a Blackbird trying to land on a live cable three times, and on each time it shied away from the cable. I cannot be sure if it ever touched the cable but its adverse reaction was at no more than a centimetre or two from the cable. I assume that there is an electrical field around a live cable which birds can detect and dislike. Ravens have used pylons for nesting in the Carrington area to the north and this behaviour could also occur here in the future.

## Nature reserves

There are three areas here which are classified as nature reserves.

1. Sinderland Green Woods is managed by the Cheshire Wildlife Trust. The woods to the west of the bridge over the brook show no sign of active management, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. Nature may just be being allowed to progress without interference. The section to the east of the bridge has occasionally had fallen trees removed from blocking the one path. Access to this site is supposed to be by permit only, but the path is regularly used by dog walkers. The official website for this location is <http://www.cheshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/sinderland-green-woods>.
2. Brookheys Covert is also managed by the Cheshire Wildlife Trust. It is well maintained with a good footpath through it. See <http://www.cheshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/brookheys-covert> for details. Only a very small part of this reserve occurs within the kilometre square.
3. There is a small area on Dark Lane near to the bridge which has been labelled as a nature reserve for at least 40 years. The only sign states "Dark Lane Nature Reserve by agreement with Shell Chemicals UK Ltd". The fencing around this site fell down many years ago. This land is no longer owned by Shell and the official status of this area is uncertain. There is no indication as to who would now manage this site and there is no evidence of any maintenance. I hope to raise this with the Cheshire Wildlife Trust and to find out if this the new owners will protect this area.

## Access

This area is bounded by Sinderland Lane to the south but this road is quite unsuitable for pedestrian access. In parts it is narrow and winding and is subject to fast and frequent traffic for much of the day. Road accidents are not uncommon and have occurred in most years. Apart from this problem, access within the kilometre square is good as it is bounded by good tracks (with little farm traffic) and a clearly defined public footpath. There is also a permissive footpath but this is so frequently flooded that it is of little use and I doubt that anyone uses it.

The only public transport available is the 247 bus route which stops on Sinderland Lane next to the junction with White House Lane and Dark Lane. The latest information that I have is that this service is half-hourly on weekdays and hourly at weekends. Access by cycle is easy from the rest of Carrington Moss north of here, and this route allows a cyclist to avoid the hazard of Sinderland Lane.

For access by vehicle, the narrow roads provide few opportunities for parking. If a very rare bird were ever to occur here there could be major problems with a large influx of cars. Therefore it is likely that the presence here of such a bird would not be published until after it had left.

At some times of the year it is possible to walk along the field boundaries without damaging any crops. These are not footpaths and access is dependent on the season and on which crops are being grown. There are also some informal paths which are only kept accessible by frequent use. In late spring and summer many of these become overgrown and difficult or even impossible to use. The routes available for walking can vary from year to year, depending on their usage. This means that it is possible to have many visits without having to always follow the same route. The access from Sinderland Lane to Dark Lane is by a stile which could prove to be difficult to anyone with mobility problems.

In times of heavy rain there is little shelter is available. The only option is the bus shelter on Sinderland Lane next to the junction with Dark Lane. Similarly there are very few places where one can rest. Occasionally there are fallen trees which can be useful, but these eventually get overgrown.

### Access problems

A local issue is that there is one property where the owners appear to make little attempt to keep their dogs under control. These animals obviously believe that their territory includes the adjacent public track. This is one site where there is little point in birdwatching when the dogs are on the loose. Whilst so far their behaviour has been no more than threatening there is one particularly aggressive dog which comes far too close for comfort. This problem is much reduced since June 2017, but still occasionally occurs.

Farmers occasionally spray their fields and I would advise avoiding being downwind of this operation. Some years ago in Carrington Moss area, whilst on a public footpath I heard a nearby tractor and noticed a strange smell. The farmer was spraying on the other side of hedge. At the time I thought nothing of this and had returned home within an hour where I soon found myself increasingly unwell. I remember nothing of the next four hours. After this period I rapidly recovered, but I had no idea to what I had been exposed to. All of this is quite circumstantial, but there is always a risk that any spray may contain substances to which an individual is particularly sensitive. This could happen even with constituents which have been certified as being safe and when the farmer is working entirely within the published safety guidelines.

Parts of Carrington Moss have long been feared for the ferocity of its biting insects in summer. As I usually visit early in the morning, I have had few problems within my study area. However in hot weather there can be hordes of horse flies anywhere, even very early in the morning. The only guidance that I can give to anyone nervous of insects and who wants to avoid this problem is to use a good insect repellent. Even this, whilst preventing bites, does not reduce the number of flies circling around. If you really can't cope with hordes of flies, I would suggest avoiding the summer months entirely, or at least only visit in cool, damp or windy weather. The period June to August really isn't really that good for birds, so you are unlikely to miss much by limiting your visits to the period September to May. Even in high summer, damp, cloudy or windy conditions can often reduce the insect problem to insignificant levels.

### Environmental issues

The brook has very occasionally been polluted by the sewage works upstream. These are generally short-lived events and once reported have rapidly been resolved. The number of fish-eating birds such as Little Grebe, Grey Heron and Kingfisher which choose to remain for some time show that the brook probably maintains a healthy population of fish and other aquatic life.

The derelict railway track to the north is not officially defunct. It could, in theory, be reinstated at any time. It is currently waterlogged and overgrown with willows. It is surprisingly poor in its variety of wildlife. This may be because it is waterlogged or because it is still immature. Reinstating this railway (which has repeatedly been proposed) might have little adverse effect of the wildlife here.

### Active conservation

It is good to report that there is some positive action here. One farmer regularly plants one or two hectares of bird-friendly crops which regularly attract large flocks of finches in winter. These flocks then regularly attract the attention of raptors such as Sparrowhawk and Merlin. It is the same farmer who has put up a large number of nest boxes in a small area of woodland. I have seen what appears to be a Barn Owl box but with no sign of occupation. I have not noted any conservation activity in the nature reserves here. However this does not necessarily indicate neglect as it could be a deliberate policy of non-intervention. It could also be that they are doing substantial amounts of work that I fail to recognise.



### Human activity

This is a very quiet area with low levels of distant traffic noise. This makes it easy to hear birds.

The farming activities here are generally limited to only a few days each year and only occasionally have negative impacts on the leisure users of this land. The harvesting of root crops such as carrots and potatoes can take several days, and at this time some tracks can become very muddy. There are small numbers of regular dog walkers, some of whom are quite knowledgeable about birds. The tracks are regularly used by horse riders, walkers and cyclists.

Unauthorised vehicles used to be occasional but rarely caused problems except for fly-tipping and many years ago the dumping of stolen cars. There has long been a wrecked car on Dark Lane – it first appeared as a yellow Renault Clio in the middle 1990's but is now just an unidentifiable heap. Access to the Moss is now much better controlled with locked gates and unauthorised vehicles are now rarely seen. There is still a small amount of fly-tipping here, so it seems that some unauthorised access is still occurring.

The old railway sidings area to the north has for many years been used by off-road motor bikes at weekends. This was fenced off in early 2016 but the fencing was soon removed (presumably by the bikers). The straight and wide tracks crossing Carrington Moss are sometimes subject to substantial disturbance by groups of motor bikes (unlicensed and presumably uninsured). One event that I saw resulted in grazing horses panicking at the noise of several bikes passing close by. This problem of noise and speed occurs unpredictably and is probably impossible to police as there remains a wide choice of exit routes available to bikers. The police are aware of this situation and do occasionally visit the area.

There is a small amount of digging for bottles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rubbish tip areas on Dark Lane. This has left this area with many deep holes and large areas of discarded bottles which when concealed by vegetation are very slippery. Therefore this is a hazardous area in which to walk. There are other areas which are used by bottle diggers, but here these people are more conscientious and fill in the holes after their excavations so that they do not present a hazard to others.

Shooting is uncommon here but there is occasionally authorised shooting of woodpigeons here (usually on autumn Sundays). I once found the remains of two Canada Geese. These had been plucked on site, so all that I found was the feathers. On Sundays distant shooting also is frequently heard but this is from a local clay-pigeon site. Local farmers sometimes use bird-scarers which produce bangs every few minutes and this could be mistaken for shooting.

In general the overall level of disturbance is low.

### Environmental changes in the last thirty years

As would be expected farming has now become more intensive with an increased use of chemicals. There are far fewer weeds present within crops than ever before. For the farmers this is progress, but this is unlikely to be true for the wildlife. Birds which use weed seeds as their major food source in the summer have decreased, and some are now totally absent.

There has been a significant influx of Himalayan Balsam within the woodland areas. There are now large areas of these plants which have crowded out many native plant species. Japanese Knotweed is now also increasing in some areas, but is so far limited to isolated clumps. Sinderland Green Woods has some long-standing patches of bamboo which could eventually prove to be invasive. There are also some rhododendron plants here which are likely to spread.



## Major changes to the bird populations

The more significant changes in the populations here can be summarised as follows:

1. Until about 1990 Corn Buntings were regular breeders here, but are now extinct.
2. Turtle Dove was formerly a regular spring visitor, and possibly bred. It is now only a vagrant here.
3. The Cuckoo used to be a regular spring migrant, but is now no more than a rare visitor.
4. As expected the species which are currently expanding their range in Britain are now appearing more regularly here – Red Kite, Osprey and Little Egret are obvious examples. However these are still rare – they are just less rare than a few decades ago.
5. The Hobby had long been a regular but scarce migrant here. Now family groups including juveniles have been seen here from July to September. So far there is no evidence of them breeding locally but these late summer records could easily be from the nearby and expanding Cheshire population which is reported to now exceed 50 pairs.
6. Buzzards and Ravens are now commonly seen and obviously breeding locally. This situation would have been thought quite impossible thirty years ago when both were rare winter visitors.
7. Although the Willow Tit is still regularly recorded in winter, it used to be common here throughout the year, and presumably bred here.

There had also been some long term changes and there are some species which have been lost and are unlikely ever to return. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Carrington Moss was a lowland moss which supported Red Grouse and possibly Hen Harriers. I would also imagine that other locally long-extinct birds such as Wryneck and Red backed Shrike would have bred here.

## Nearby locations which are important for birds

The nearest areas which are of significance in relation to their bird populations are:

1. The Shell Pool. This is about 1 kilometre to the northwest and is the nearest area of permanent standing water. It maintains substantial numbers of ducks, but many of these species have not been recorded in my study area, probably because the birds fly in and out of this site at night (this behaviour being typical of many ducks). In the 1980's the water levels fluctuated and at times of low water levels this was a good location for seeing waders, but now that the water levels are stable there are no areas of shallow water suitable for waders.
2. The Altrincham Effluent Treatment Works. This is about 1 kilometre to the east. It also has permanent areas of water, but also has many shallow margins, and attracts waders as well as ducks. It appears that the quality of this site for birds has diminished in the last twenty years.
3. The Industrial area to the north. This comes as close as 100 metres to the edges of my study area. For many years this has included large areas of gravel which are attractive for some species of waders as potential sites for breeding. More importantly the high security around this site means that disturbance of any birds here is rare. Apart from Lapwing, I am uncertain as to which other species have bred here, but Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover and Oystercatcher have all been recorded within this site. This information may now only be of historical interest as this site is now due for development.

## The future

It is likely that by 2018 the proposed development by the Himor Group of the industrial area to the north of this area will have started. Although the area being developed is primarily industrial it includes large areas of gravel which has in the past had regular breeding Lapwings and other waders. When this area is developed it will no longer be available to these birds, but this may not happen for some years.

The long-term future of this area is uncertain. The Greater Manchester Spatial Framework specifies areas of land within Greater Manchester which are suitable for development. The area labelled as “New Carrington” includes most of Carrington Moss north of Sinderland Brook. The potential development here could result in 7,500 residential units by 2035, with potentially 11,500 units being delivered over the next 30-40 years. Many long-term plans eventually come to nothing, but equally Carrington Moss is not going to remain unchanged forever.

## Chapter 3 – Past observations

I had occasionally watched the birds in this area since 1982. This was one of the last parts of Greater Manchester to have breeding Corn Buntings and they were still common here in the 1980s. At that time Turtle Doves and Cuckoos were still regularly recorded. In the early 1980s Little Ringed Plovers were frequently seen here. They almost certainly bred on the gravel in the derelict railway sidings to the north of this area. All of these birds have now gone.

Some birds that were formerly scarce and whose appearance could produce some excitement have now become more frequent. Both Hobbies and Sparrowhawks have now become quite regular, but I still find them just as exciting! Buzzards are everywhere now but were seen less than annually in the 1980s. Their nearest breeding location at that time was Tatton Park, but even there they vanished for a few years. This was rumoured at the time to be due to persecution, but there is no indication that any similar behaviour has occurred here. There are also some species that used to be common and then vanished, but which have now reappeared. After many years of absence Yellow Wagtails are now regularly breeding again. Tree Sparrows have also increased but so far are only erratic breeders.

In my occasional visits before 2013 I had recorded about 90 species here. The exact number is uncertain as some of my notes from that time are incomplete. Since November 2013 I have recorded a total of 118 and of these 16 have only been seen flying overhead and taking no interest in this area. There are just two birds seen here prior to then which I have not recorded since – Woodlark and Shelduck. The sighting of a Woodlark here in 2000 is the only true rare bird that I have seen here. I also saw a pair of Shelduck flying over some time in spring in the late 1990's.

Anyone watching birds for any length of time will occasionally encounter escaped birds and some of the more exotic ones can be quite a thrill. The Senegal Parakeet that I saw here in 2006 was a surprise for me. I have little knowledge of parrots so I was really surprised to be able to immediately identify this bird. This was only because I had spent some months in the previous year watching a Senegal Parakeet wandering around Ardwick in central Manchester. A Harris Hawk first seen in 2005 stayed for over two years but was mostly recorded to the north of this area. I have also seen falconers here with Harris Hawk, but not for some years. The only other birds of suspect origin that I have seen have been Guinea Fowl. These are domestic birds from Brookheys Farm that are allowed to wander.



## Chapter 4 – Current observations

Most of my visits to this area are in the morning and are usually of about two hours duration. I generally make two or three visits per week which results in an average of about 300 hours per year. My route varies according to the season. In the spring this can involve walking up to 8 kilometres, but in the summer when access is more difficult I will spend the same length of time just covering half of this distance, but doing it slower and in more detail.

An early start usually produces the best results. This is not just due to being able to hear the dawn chorus. Many birds are less active later in the day and this is probably after they have found sufficient food. As might be expected, human disturbance is rare early in the morning. In the summer months the heat haze in the afternoon can be a problem when viewing distant birds.

For a typical two hour visit in the morning I can usually expect to record between 40 and 45 species, but this can vary and depends on the weather more than anything else. As might be expected, day totals are lower in poor weather and then sometimes barely exceed 25. Vary rarely do I record more than 50 species and this is invariably at times of migration in spring and autumn.

Foggy conditions can be the most frustrating situation, but usually the visibility eventually improves. These are the days when I need to be patient and I then concentrate on the wooded areas where the birds are close and still visible.

I have not kept notes of the weather on my visits, but the biggest problem in finding birds is when it is windy. On calm mornings I can hear singing birds at some distance but when it is windy this can become impossible. For reasons that I do not understand the wind appears to be at a minimum at about dawn, so that this is an added advantage in visiting at this time. A good example of the problems of windy conditions occurred in 2015 when over a period of about two weeks I repeatedly thought that I heard a distant Lesser Whitethroat singing. This was never closer than 100 metres and I was in a position where I could get no closer. The wind prevented me from hearing it clearly so this was no more than a possible record. However a week later, I did find a male Lesser Whitethroat singing about 300 metres away. It now seems quite likely that these records relate to the same bird.

The areas of woodland allow me to find a sheltered spot whatever the direction of the wind. Not only does this help me to find the birds, it also appears that in windy conditions some birds also seek shelter and favour the same areas that I do. On some visits this can mean that the birds come to me!

Although I usually spend most of my time walking around this area there are some locations where I just stop and wait for the birds to come to me. This can be for up to half an hour or even more. This has proved to be a useful technique and is especially useful in woodland areas in autumn where the fallen leaves make it impossible to walk quietly. I have reached the point where I feel that now know the best locations for many species. Nevertheless, I try to include as much of the area as possible and not just to visit the best places.

In some parts I walk very slowly and quietly. I am obviously successful in being quiet, as many times I have inadvertently flushed Pheasants and Partridges, sometimes as close as a metre from my feet. This can be quite a shock, both to the poor birds and to me!

My main methods in finding birds are to listen, and to always watch the sky. Many birds flying over are silent, and I can spend a long time just looking upwards for anything of interest.

Sinderland Brook is a valuable area for many birds. However it can also be a major barrier. If I hear an unfamiliar bird call on the other side of the brook, I have no way in getting closer to the bird. This frustrating scenario has occurred many times!

For the first year I just used binoculars, but soon progressed to also using a telescope. In windy conditions the use of a tripod allowed a steady view of the birds and the telescope obviously also allows the identification of more distant birds. As some of the fields are large it can be impossible to identify birds in the centre of the fields only using binoculars. Using a telescope can also be very useful in that if I see something indistinct I can often identifying it without additional walking. This is especially useful in finding Peregrines perched on distant pylons.

There are still some routes that I rarely use. This is from my experience in that these are locations which just do not produce interesting birds. However I still sometimes force myself to check these areas just in case that the situation has improved. Also on looking through my records I note that over the years I have consistently neglected the months of June and July. My aim now is to deal with both of these shortcomings.

Some of the routes that I use are very rarely used by anyone else. This means that I am often the first person there in many days. If I am careful and quiet, I can then find birds which would otherwise have moved on to other quiet locations. The American poet Robert Frost expressed it perfectly at the end of his 1920 poem "The Road Not Taken":

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*



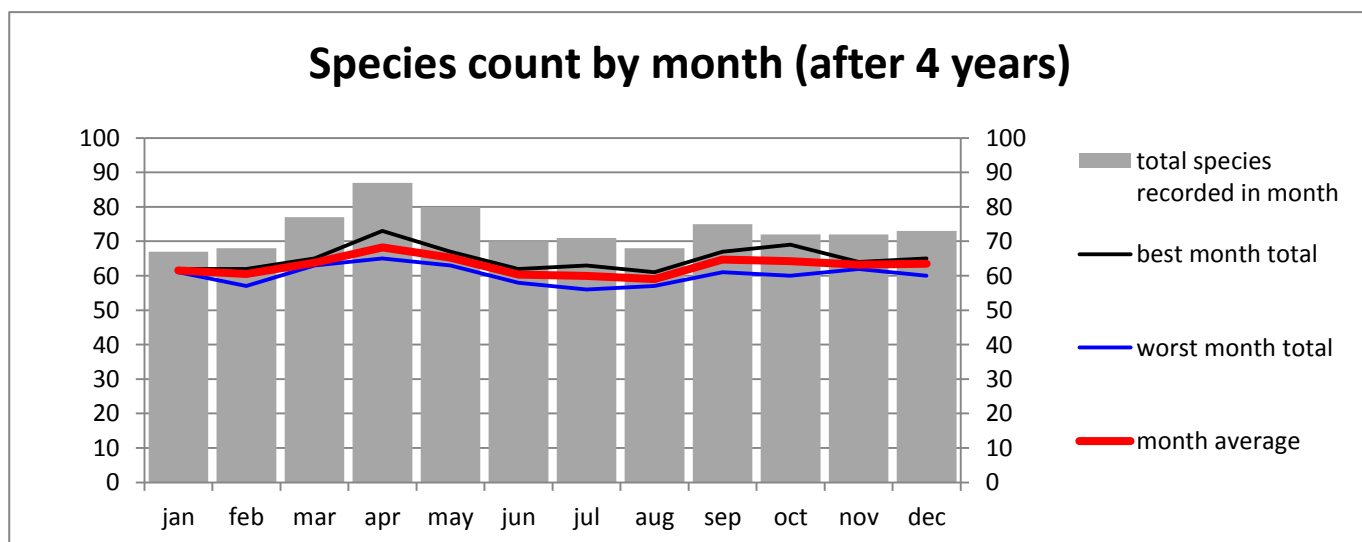
## Chapter 5 – Keeping long term records

A major advantage of keeping long-term records is that trends can be identified. Whilst an influx of a species will usually be obvious, the lack of a usually regular species may go unnoticed. A good example of this is the Siskin which is normally a regular a winter visitor in varying numbers. However the winter of 2014-15 produced only one bird. The scale of this absence only became obvious when the figures for that winter were compared with other years. The likely reason for this event is that there was such an abundance of food elsewhere that year such that the birds did not need to migrate as far as is usual. A similar poor numbers of Siskins has also appeared in the winter of 2016-17.

There are other absences which have been highlighted by the data I have collected. Common Gulls are unexpectedly rare (seven records in four years) whilst they are frequently recorded in the suburban areas only a few kilometres to the East where they are commonly seen feeding on playing fields. There is also the regular pattern in that Skylarks are frequent in every month apart from August. I have no idea why this is, but this pattern has been confirmed by other observers.

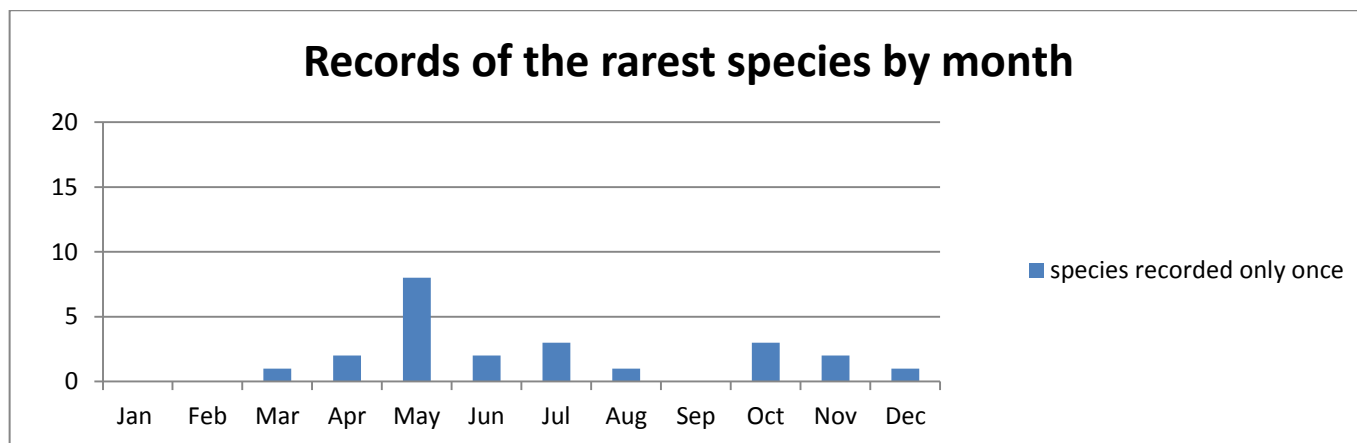
Another benefit of having a large amount of data is to note correlations between species. In July 2015 there was an unexpected movement of Siskins which do not normally arrive before October. Although in much smaller numbers this was matched by an unprecedented arrival of Redpolls. It seems likely that both of these events were caused by the same driving force such as a lack of food elsewhere.

This is probably the best point to report that I include all records of birds that I see or hear when I am within the area. I do not try to work out if birds flying over actually cross the area; if I identify them then I record it. This means that some larger birds (especially Herons, Geese and Buzzards) are recorded even if they are actually quite distant. The same applies to birds that are only heard, as it is then not possible to be certain that the bird is within the kilometre square. This is exactly the same as I do with my garden bird list - if I see or hear it from my garden then it goes on the list.



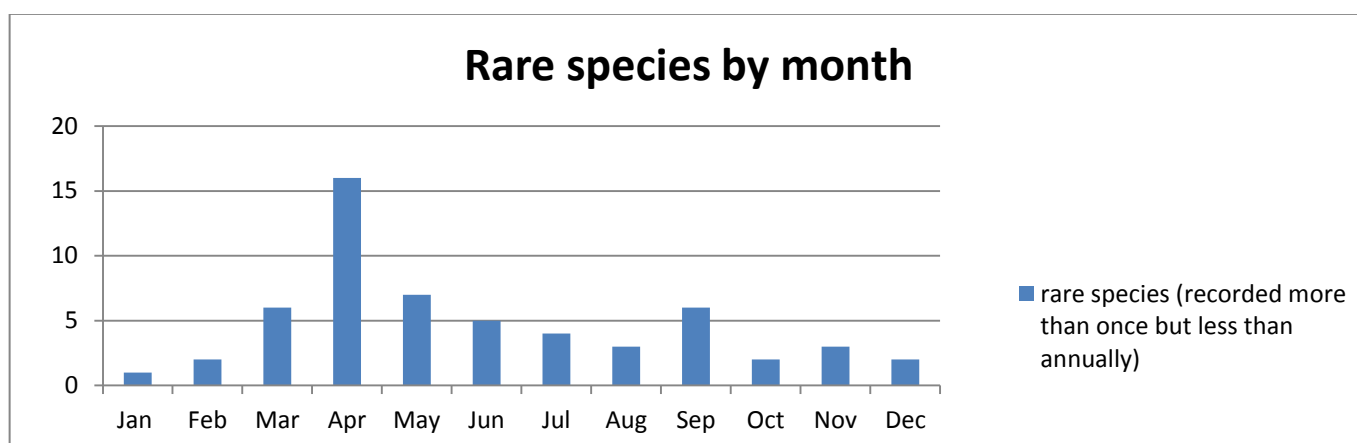
**Table 1** Total species count by month

This chart shows the typical number of species that can be seen at any time of the year. With enough effort it should be possible to see 60 species in any month. However July and August may need a few extra hours to achieve this target. In these months even the common species can be skulking and hard to find, and there is little chance of finding anything rarer.



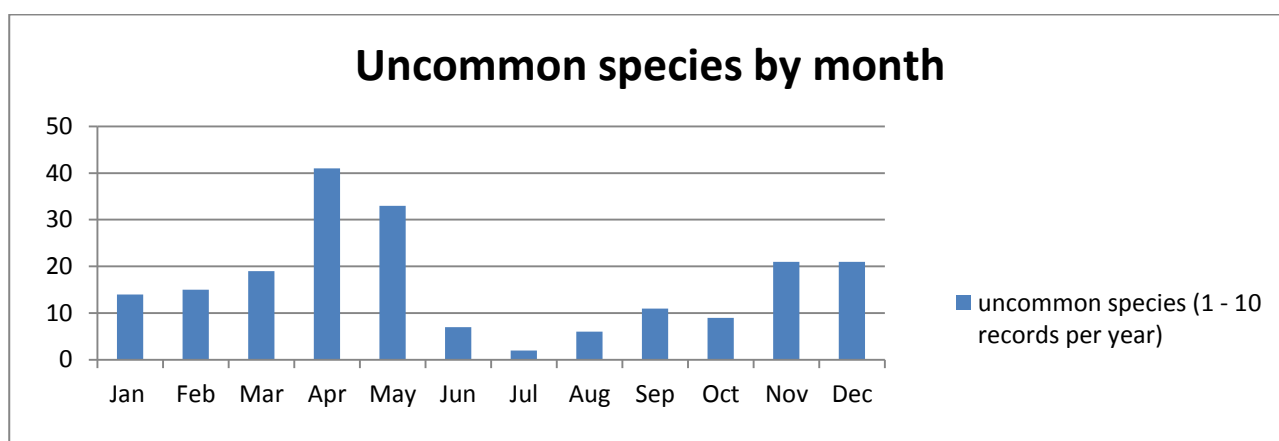
**Table 2** Records of the rarest species (those recorded only once) by month

There is an obvious peak of records in May coinciding with spring migration but the records for the rest of the year shows do not show any real pattern apart from a slight peak in autumn.



**Table 3** Other rare species occurrences by month

There is a definite pattern of occurrence of the rare species here. There is an obvious peak of records coinciding with spring migration but surprisingly a much smaller autumn peak in September. There is a marked lack of records of rare birds in winter. I would have expected wandering winter birds to feature more, but this area has not had a hard winter for some years.



**Table 4 Uncommon species occurrences by month**

The uncommon species show a different pattern. Although there is a peak of records coinciding with spring migration as would be expected, there is no obvious peak for the autumn migration. However there is a noticeable peak in early winter and the lack of the uncommon species in mid-summer is obvious.

Studying these three charts it becomes obvious that August is the month with the least chance of finding anything unusual.



## Chapter 6 - Understanding the landscape

In the larger home patches that I have covered in the past I managed to learn those areas quite well, but there were always some parts that I never visited. However this intensive study of a much smaller area has allowed me to know almost every bush here and this has produced some unexpected benefits.

Willow Tits are occasional at any time of year, but more than half of the records have been in one tiny clump of bushes, and most of the remainder are limited to three other very small areas. Outside of these locations Willow Tits are rarely recorded. This situation has been noted in every year. The reason for this distribution is uncertain but all of these locations include old and decaying elder bushes and this may be significant.

Sinderland Brook is the main area of flowing water here but it is very difficult to view. It follows a very winding course and there are only a few sites where it is possible to see more than a few metres and in summer is often overgrown. It is not easy to be able to find birds on the brook without disturbing them. To avoid any disturbance to potentially breeding species I have often avoided walking along the brook in the spring. This may be a lost cause as I cannot know how many others (particularly dog-walkers) do follow the course of the brook and then inadvertently disturb the birds. However the winding nature of the brook may mean that many birds can find quiet areas where they can remain undisturbed.

I have found a few locations from which small lengths of the brook can be viewed without disturbing the wildlife. The best location is the straight section west of the bridge within Sinderland Green Woods. This has (but usually only with a telescope) provided views of Mandarin Duck, Goosander, Moorhen and Little Grebe. When there has been heavy rain and the Brook is fast flowing there are often no water birds visible.

I have found that the occurrence of many birds depends to a great extent on the crops which are growing. It appears that carrot fields are generally hopeless for birds, but beans and potatoes are quite good. The kilometre square includes only 16 arable fields and in some years the variety of crops here is small. The occurrence of migrant birds also depends on the farming regime. Recently ploughed fields are the best locations for finding many migrants, but in the spring of 2017 most of the fields were of autumn sown crops and ploughing of the remaining fields did not start until April. This situation coincided with the lowest numbers of Wheatears and Meadow Pipits recorded in early spring.

Some birds seem to push the boundaries of what I would think were suitable habitats. I was surprised to find that Kingfishers can regularly occur on tiny ditches less than 2 feet wide.





## Chapter 7 – Species details

### Records from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2013.

Breeding within the kilometre square is probable or confirmed for 42 species. These are shown by an asterisk preceding their name.

Little Grebe	Single birds have been recorded on the brook every year in the period from September to March. Because of the difficulty in seeing birds on the brook this species will always be under-recorded. However it does appear that some individuals appear to stay for several weeks. It is best regarded as an occasional winter visitor.
Cormorant	These are frequently seen flying over throughout the year and they are also sometimes seen perched on the pylons. They are most commonly seen from April to July. Cormorants have occasionally been seen on the brook, but I have yet to see one catch anything! Most records are of birds flying over in a north-south direction and are likely to be birds commuting from the colony at Rostherne Mere to feeding areas to the north.
Little Egret	This is still no more than a rare visitor, and most of the records have been close to the nearby Brookheys Farm and so far only in February and April. I have only recorded them twice but other observers have also reported them in this area. Some birds appear to stay for over a week. It has also occurred in nearby Dunham Massey Park. These records indicate that whilst still rare, it is becoming more frequent here. This is only to be expected as Little Egrets continue their spread across the country.
Grey Heron	These are regularly seen throughout the year flying over and are occasionally found feeding on the brook, particularly in the summer when water levels are low. There is a heronry at Dunham Massey Park only 3 kilometres to the south.
Mute Swan	This is only a scarce visitor. All records have been of birds flying over, mostly in late spring and autumn.
Whooper Swan	A rare winter visitor with only one record of 14 flying over in November 2014. This species quite possibly flies over this area every year, so it is just luck in being in the right place at the right time to actually see them.

Pink-footed Goose	This is an autumn migrant regularly seen flying over in large numbers. These are birds which arrive in South West Lancashire from Iceland of which many then move on to Northumberland and Norfolk. It is the latter group which are seen here. They are frequent in mid-October with numbers then reducing towards the end of the year but there is smaller peak of records from late December to January. They can be seen at any time of the day but seem to be most frequent about an hour or two after sunrise, and usually flying to the South or East. They are very uncommon here in the spring with only one record in April which suggests that these birds use a different route for their return journey. They rarely land on the fields and as most fields here have well-used paths close by, any geese on the ground are unlikely to remain undisturbed for long and will soon fly off.
Greylag Goose	This is no more than an occasional spring migrant with only one record in autumn. All records are of birds flying over, and are mostly of pairs.
Canada Goose	These are frequently seen flying over in spring and autumn, but are rare in July and in mid-winter. This is a common bird on the Shell Pond about one kilometre to the north east. Autumn flocks can be large with over 100 birds and most records are in the early morning or late evening and are sometimes heard after dark.
Mandarin Duck	One was present on Sinderland Brook on four dates in October and November 2015. This was either a female or an immature bird. Mandarins are slowly increasing in the country and further records are quite possible.
Gadwall	An irregular spring visitor on the brook from late March to early June, but not in every year. Pairs have sometimes remained for a few weeks but there has been no evidence of breeding. This species has regularly bred along the Manchester Ship Canal at Partington, only two kilometres to the north west.
Teal	This is a common winter visitor from September to April, with flocks of up to 40. Even larger flocks have been recorded nearby at the Altrincham ETW which is less than two kilometres to the east.
*Mallard	A common breeding resident. Winter numbers vary dramatically, with peak numbers of over a hundred sometimes spending the night on the brook near Sinderland Green Woods and which then disperse north-west towards the nearby Shell Pond area in the early morning.
Garganey	A pair flying over on in July 2017 is the only record. It is only occasionally reported in Greater Manchester.
Goosander	An occasional winter visitor on the brook (November to April) and also sometimes seen flying over. All records have been of small groups of up to four.

Red Kite	Only one record of a single bird in August 2015. I have also seen Red Kites twice over my house which is only four kilometres to the north-east. As this species continues to expand in Britain, further records become more likely.
Sparrowhawk	These are frequent in winter but are rarely seen from May to July. This does indicate that there is no breeding close by. In winter they are frequently seen hunting through the finch flocks in the larger fields. Sparrowhawks are far more frequently recorded than thirty years ago when they were no more than an occasional winter visitor.
Buzzard	Thirty years ago Buzzards were only rare winter visitors here but now are a regular resident which can be seen daily. They are most obvious when soaring, but early in the mornings they can be seen on the ground in the open fields looking for small items of prey. They are frequently seen perched on pylons. In ideal conditions in the late summer up to ten or more can be seen soaring. They are also regularly mobbed by Carrion Crows and also sometimes by Peregrine, Hobby and Kestrel.
Osprey	Only two records, both of single birds in June 2014 and May 2017. These late spring dates (when adults would already be breeding) suggest that these are young birds wandering back to their natal areas. I also saw one here in autumn 2005. Ospreys are slowly increasing in Britain and it would be hoped that this should produce more records in the future.
Kestrel	They are regularly seen throughout the year but do not appear to breed within the area. Kestrel numbers have obviously decreased over the last thirty years. This is in line with a reported decline across the country.
Merlin	An occasional winter visitor from October to March, but most records are in mid-winter. They are usually seen hunting over the larger fields, especially when there are high numbers of Skylarks. Most records are of birds passing through and they rarely stay for more than a day or two.
Hobby	Historically the Hobby was no more than a scarce autumn migrant; it is now regular in both spring and autumn. In 2014 and 2015 family parties were present almost every day in August and September but this has not occurred since. I have not found any evidence of Hobbies breeding nearby so these birds may well have been from the increasing population in Cheshire. If they continue to expand it seems likely that they could eventually breed in this area. The increasing number of birds lingering in May emphasises this possibility.

Peregrine	This was formerly no more than a rare winter visitor to the Carrington Moss area, and some of these birds wore jesses so were undoubtedly escapes. It is now a regular winter visitor in the period September to February and some individuals appear to stay for several weeks. There are also small peaks of records in April to May and in late July. In 2012 I saw a Peregrine attack a large flock of Feral Pigeons and it successfully took the only white bird in the flock! The nearest published breeding site of the Peregrine is in Manchester City Centre, but there may well be other breeding pairs even closer than this.
*Grey Partridge	A regular resident. They may have been some decrease here, but autumn groups of ten or more can still be found.
Red-legged Partridge	A rare visitor with one in May 2017. These were occasionally recorded in the 1990's. These may have been birds introduced for shooting. They have also been recorded in this area by other observers in 2008 and 2012.
Quail	This is an occasional late spring visitor with an earliest date of 13 <sup>th</sup> May. Also once recorded in September. Most records are of transient birds staying only for a day or two but in 2011 there was one in field 25 which stayed for eight days. These birds are usually impossible to see, but are only detected by their distinctive song.
*Pheasant	A regular and common resident.
Moorhen	This is a regular winter visitor on Sinderland Brook with most records being from September to April. It is probably under recorded as the brook is so difficult to view. Although usually rare after mid-April, 2017 produced records well into July. This could indicate possible breeding or may just relate to a single late lingering bird. The only month without any records is August.
Oystercatcher	An occasional visitor from April to September, but with May having the most records. They are now more frequent than thirty years ago and this fits in with the national increase of records of Oystercatchers breeding inland. All records are of birds flying over.
Little Ringed Plover	This is a rare spring migrant which has only been only recorded in April and May. They probably bred on the derelict railway sidings to the north of this square in the early 1980's. By about 1985 the gravel here became overgrown and was no longer suitable for these birds and it is now covered by dense birch scrub. More recent records may be of birds prospecting the nearby large areas of gravel within the Shell complex where it is quite possible that they may have bred in the past. This area is now due for development, so any possibility of local breeding is now vanishing.
Ringed Plover	A rare autumn migrant, with only two records (both in September). Ringed Plovers may have bred within the Shell complex to the north, but the development of this area will soon stop this.

Golden Plover	A rare visitor only recorded in the period of October to December. All records have been of single birds flying over.
*Lapwing	This is a resident breeding in small and possibly diminishing numbers. In the winter, flocks of up to fifty or more often appear. These are likely to be the same birds that sometimes roost on the roofs of the Broadheath retail park about three kilometres to the east. It has been reported that these may be visible from the top of the Asda car park.
Snipe	This is no more than an occasional winter visitor (September to February). Most records are of single birds. There is little habitat suitable for Snipe in this area and the best chance of seeing one here is to spot a passing bird flying over.
Woodcock	This used to be a regular winter visitor but is now unexpectedly rare with only two records in four years (December 2016 and November 2017). In the cold winter of 2012-13 there were at least three birds present in Sinderland Green Woods. All subsequent winters have been comparatively mild. A properly cold winter may bring in more records of Woodcock.
Black tailed Godwit	A flock of twelve flying east over Altrincham Crematorium in late May 2017 was totally unexpected!
Whimbrel	A scarce spring migrant with the only records being of a group of three feeding in a field for some hours in 23 <sup>rd</sup> April 2014, and a single bird flying over on 25 <sup>th</sup> April 2015. These dates coincide with the peak passage of Whimbrels in Lancashire, when there is a large roost of migrating birds at Barnacre reservoir.
Curlew	This used to be a regular spring migrant, but in the last four years has only been recorded twice (in March and April 2017). The well-documented decline of Curlew in Britain could be the reason for the current lack of records. However it may be that I have just been unlucky in not being in the right place at the right time.
Green Sandpiper	This is a less than annual visitor and so far it has only been seen flying over in August and November. It is quite possible that they could feed on Sinderland Brook, but finding them would be very difficult. This is a regular migrant visitor to the Altrincham ETW area which is only two kilometres to the east.
Mediterranean Gull	The only record is of two adults flying over in July 2015. This species had previously been regularly recorded less than a kilometre to the north at the Shell Pond. This species is increasing in this country, and future records are quite likely.
Black-headed Gull	Regularly seen throughout the year but is most numerous in the winter. They frequently follow the plough. Small numbers have bred at the Shell Pond close by, but there is also a large breeding colony at of over 500 pairs at Woolston Eyes nine kilometres to the east.

Common Gull	This is a rare winter and spring visitor with only seven records in four years. This is surprising as in the winter months it is a frequent visitor to playing fields only 3 kilometres to the east.
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Recorded throughout the year but most numerous in the winter. Most records are of birds flying over but they are also occasionally seen feeding on the ground. It is possibly declining due to the closure of landfill sites.
Herring Gull	A regular winter visitor which is recorded flying over the area, but very rarely landing in the fields. In winter they are much more numerous than Lesser Black-backed Gulls, but are scarce in the summer months. The continuing closure of landfill sites may explain the diminishing number of records over many years.
Great Black-backed Gull	This was formerly a regular winter visitor flying over in small numbers, but is now no more than a rare winter visitor with only two records so far, both of single birds flying over, in March 2014 and December 2016.
Feral Pigeon	A common and numerous resident species. They are obviously breeding within the industrial complex to the north.
*Stock Dove	This is a common resident with winter flocks of up to 50 or even more. They appear to be breeding in Sinderland Green Woods.
*Woodpigeon	A common breeding resident with winter flocks of several hundred. In cold weather there can be large movements with several thousand birds flying over the area.
*Collared Dove	This is a regular resident but only in small numbers. They are usually recorded close to houses and active farms and are scarce away from these locations.
Turtle Dove	In the 1980's this was a regular species here but was never common. It is now effectively extinct here. I have only one record on 4 <sup>th</sup> June 2014, and this was the first here in many years. This species can now be classified as no more than a rare vagrant in Greater Manchester.
Cuckoo	I have only one record of a singing bird in June 2015. Cuckoos have definitely declined here as they used to be recorded several times each spring in the 1980s.
Barn Owl	I have recorded Barn Owls here less than annually (July 2015 and March 2016). However my knowledge of the status of all owls here is poor as my night time visits are rare.



Little Owl	I have recorded Little Owls in this area for over forty years. Most records were from one favoured tree near to Brookheys Farm but by 2015 this site was deserted. I initially feared that the birds had gone from the area, but nearby records in late 2016 and early 2017 showed that at least one was still present in the area. These birds may have only moved a few hundred metres, but if their new site is not easily visible from any road or path then they will remain unseen. There are many potential nesting sites nearby and it could be that Little Owls are less rare here than the lack of records suggest.
Tawny Owl	This is probably a regular resident but I have very few records as I rarely visit at night.
Swift	A common summer visitor usually from mid-May to early August. The earliest migrants can sometimes appear as early as the end of April.
Kingfisher	This is only an occasional visitor at almost any time of the year except for high summer. There is a noticeable peak of records in March and this is presumably of birds migrating back to their breeding sites. Most records have been on Sinderland Brook but they have also been seen on tiny drainage ditches.
Green Woodpecker	One was present from January to May in 2014 and wandered quite widely and it took several weeks of effort to actually see it. This is typical of this species as they have in the past occasionally taken up residence on Carrington Moss for several weeks. Past records show that this happens two or three times each decade. The only subsequent record is of one present for two days in late July 2017.
*Great Spotted Woodpecker	This is a regular resident and there is often a noticeable autumn influx. Drumming in the spring is regularly heard, but at least one bird has regularly been seen drumming on pylons. The sound produced is very unusual!
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	I have only one record of a female in May 2015. This bird was moving north but did stop to rest for a few minutes in an isolated tree. This has long been a very rare bird in this area. This was only my fourth record of finding this bird in Greater Manchester in forty years.
*Skylark	This is a regular and abundant resident but noticeably very scarce in August. This pattern has occurred in every year. It has also been confirmed by other observers, and also nationally in BTO records. During migration periods large flocks of over 200 have been present.
Sand Martin	There is no suitable habitat for this bird here. It is mainly a rare spring migrant with one or two records each year. The earliest date is 21 <sup>st</sup> April and it has also occurred in July and August.
*Swallow	A regular and common summer visitor with an earliest date of 31 <sup>st</sup> March and occasionally staying until October.

*House Martin	A regular summer visitor from April to September.
Tree Pipit	An occasional passage migrant recorded in April, August and September.
Meadow Pipit	A regular winter visitor from September to April (typically with up to about 30 birds present) with noticeably larger numbers up to 70 or more passing through in spring.
*Yellow Wagtail	A regular summer visitor (late April to August) which probably breeds. This bird has had a variable history here. It was common in the 1980's and then declined to being only an occasional migrant, but it has now increased again but in much lower numbers than before.
*Grey Wagtail	This is primarily a common winter visitor, but it has been recorded in all months except August. Singing males are regularly been recorded on the brook in spring but usually leave by mid-May. However in 2017 a pair remained and raised at least two young.
*Pied Wagtail	This is a common resident species in small numbers and there is often a noticeable influx of migrating birds both in spring and autumn. These flocks often include small numbers of White Wagtails. These are European birds noticeably paler than British Pied Wagtails and are passing through on their way to and from Scandinavia, Iceland and the East coast of Greenland. They occur singly or in groups of up to five, usually in March and April, and once in November.
*Wren	The Wren is a regular, widespread and very common resident. They have been recorded on every day-time visit. The only other species to achieve this was the Carrion Crow.
*Dunnock	A regular common resident. In windy conditions they can be skulking and difficult to find and may then go unrecorded.
*Robin	A regular common resident.
Whinchat	Whinchats are an occasional passage migrant recorded both in spring (April and May) and also in September. Almost all records have been on the track on the north side of field 25 (see map 5).
Stonechat	This is an occasional visitor in very early spring (February and March) and also from September to November. In contrast to elsewhere on Carrington Moss there have not yet been any long-term wintering birds here. All of the birds seen here have been in the same locations as those favoured by Whinchats.

Wheatear	Wheatears are a regular spring migrant and I had autumn records here in the 1990's but none since. The earliest date here is 23 <sup>rd</sup> March, but there is often a large passage in mid-May and these late birds are probably those migrating to Greenland. In 2014 on a before-dawn visit in early May I noted Wheatears emerging from a hawthorn hedge where they had probably been roosting and within a period of only five minutes ten birds had emerged to start feeding in an open field.
Ring Ouzel	This is a scarce migrant with only one record of an immature bird in April 2014. This was only a distant view of a very nondescript bird and which could easily have been dismissed as a Blackbird. It is a less than annual visitor to Carrington Moss.
*Blackbird	A common resident with an obvious influx of large numbers in autumn.
Fieldfare	A regular winter visitor from mid-October and sometimes in large flocks. Numbers often decline dramatically in December once all of the Hawthorn berries have gone. Sometimes there are large numbers in late spring long after all of the Redwings have gone. An example of a late flock was the unusual sight of over 350 on 9 <sup>th</sup> April 2007.
*Song Thrush	A common resident with an obvious influx in the autumn when they can appear to be present in every bush and hedge.
Redwing	This is a common winter visitor from early October to early April. However they can be scarce after early March. They are often heard singing on mild days even in mid-winter.
*Mistle Thrush	This is a regular resident in small numbers. They are frequently recorded on the pylons, a habit which I have not seen with any other thrushes.
Grasshopper Warbler	A rare spring migrant with a total of four records. This species has summered and possibly bred in apparently similar locations elsewhere on Carrington Moss. Whilst there are small areas here which appear to be suitable for this species, I would suppose that breeding here is very unlikely.
Sedge Warbler	A rare spring migrant with only one record in May 2015.
Reed Warbler	Only one record of a bird of a bird singing in a hedge in July 2017.
Lesser Whitethroat	A rare spring migrant. I have only one record of a male singing on Sinderland Lane from 17 <sup>th</sup> to 24 <sup>th</sup> May 2015, but this bird may have been present for up to two weeks before this. This has always been a scarce bird in this area and the nearest regular location that I know of is at Flixton about 5 km to the north. There has been one other record by another observer which was of a single bird in 2010.

*Whitethroat	This is a regular and common summer visitor here. One bird on 8 <sup>th</sup> May 2016 was heard singing an unusual song for several minutes in deep cover. Before I managed to see this bird I initially thought that this was a Garden Warbler. When finally seen, this bird was obviously a Whitethroat but the plumage was not of a typical bird. The upperparts were greyer and much less marked than in typical Whitethroats and with only a barely discernible wing panel which was not the usual rufous, but merely browner than the remaining upperparts. Birds of this type have been recorded before in the UK and may indicate vagrancy from an eastern population. I heard a similar bird in the spring of 2006 near to the Shell Pond also singing somewhat like a Garden Warbler for over twenty minutes. This was also from very deep cover. In that case I never managed to see more than the head of the bird, but this then proved that the bird was a Whitethroat. These records show that there are strange birds wandering through on migration whose origins can never be established.
Garden Warbler	The Garden Warbler is no more than a rare visitor which has been recorded in June, August and September. My first record of this species on Carrington Moss was of an individual on 4 <sup>th</sup> November 1984. This was so unexpected on this late date that I spent thirty minutes taking detailed notes, half hoping that this was some rarer species of which I was ignorant.
*Blackcap	This is a regular and common summer visitor. Blackcaps have not been recorded here in winter although they are regularly seen in suburban gardens to the east at this time. However they are often silent in winter and thus can be easy to miss.
*Chiffchaff	A regular and common summer visitor from early March to mid-October. It is also rarely recorded in the period November to January. February is the only month without any records. On 10 <sup>th</sup> October 2017 I heard what sounded just like a Siberian Chiffchaff (ssp. tristis). I followed this call for at least 20 minutes but unfortunately I never managed to get a good view of the bird.
*Willow Warbler	A regular summer visitor but only in very small numbers. There is only one location within the area which regularly has a singing bird. However there is a location nearby which regularly has a couple more. This is within fifty metres and these birds can be heard in good conditions and occasionally wander into the area. The numbers here appear to be much reduced compared with twenty years ago.
*Goldcrest	A regular and common resident.
Spotted Flycatcher	A rare visitor only recorded in April and September. As far as I know this species has never been common here. Another observer reported that Spotted Flycatcher bred in Brookheys Covert in 2011.

*Long-tailed Tit	A regular resident, but it is most common in winter. Flocks of long-tailed tits are always worth checking as they sometimes include other species of Tits and Warblers.
Willow Tit	This can very occasionally be seen at any time of the year, but is most frequent from July to September. It is rarest from mid-January to April. Most records are from a handful of locations. They are occasionally heard singing in late spring but these appear to be transient birds and may be failed breeders from elsewhere. Willow Tits used to breed elsewhere on Carrington Moss but this population has probably now gone. It is an easy bird to miss and an absence of records does not mean that there are no birds here. An intermittent series of records in May and June 2017 including juveniles suggests successful breeding nearby, possibly in the disused railway area.
Coal Tit	Coal tits have been recorded in every month but are most frequent in winter and are really quite rare in May and June. Breeding here is unlikely.
*Blue Tit	A regular and widespread resident.
*Great Tit	A regular and widespread common resident.
*Nuthatch	This is a regular and common resident. In some years there appears to be very few records from mid-May to early June, but this may be due to the fact that the birds are less vocal at this time as they are spending all of their time in feeding their young. In winter Nuthatches frequently commute from the woods to the nearby Yew Tree House Farm for the abundant bird food provided there.
*Treecreeper	A regular resident breeding species. In winter they can sometimes be found in hedges and small bushes well away from the wooded areas.
*Jay	This is a regular resident, but is much more common in winter than in the summer months. There is sometimes an obvious autumn influx.
*Magpie	A widespread and common resident species, sometimes in large numbers in the winter. The largest count for any one field is currently 26 but this is still a long way short of the maximum count of Magpies on my (less than one hectare) allotment site in suburban south Manchester!
Jackdaw	This is a resident with large numbers in winter, often with huge and very vocal groups flying over. In the summer months, Jackdaws are regular but only in small numbers.
Rook	A regular breeding resident with a long-standing rookery near to Brookheys Farm. This is no more than 100 metres outside this area.

*Carrion Crow	This is a common and widespread resident. With the Wren this is the only species to be recorded on every day-time visit.
Raven	Prior to the 1990's Ravens were rare vagrants to this area. However they have since increased dramatically and they are now regularly seen flying over and sometimes land on the pylons here. They are regularly seen throughout the year apart from being scarce in June and July, but this is well after they have finished breeding. There is a peak of records in April, possibly coinciding with young birds leaving their nests. They probably regularly breed to the north in the Carrington area. Many of the sightings in the early spring appear to relate to birds commuting between their nest sites and feeding locations to the south of this area.
*Starling	This is a regular visitor here and most numerous in the winter. In some years Starlings can often be absent for long periods in the summer. Until 2017 there was no indication of nesting within this area, but in that year the number of family parties around Sinderland Green confirmed that there was successful breeding there. In the winter months a few hundred are regularly seen flying over in the early morning and late evening. This movement is probably to and from a roost somewhere to the south west of here.
*House Sparrow	This is a regular and common resident which is nearly always seen close to houses or farms. Any group of sparrows seen in the fields well away from habitation have so far always proved to be Tree Sparrows.
Tree Sparrow	These were regularly recorded here until the 1990's, but they then vanished for many years. They returned again by about 2010. They are irregularly seen in all months, and may occasionally breed. Winter flocks are at least partly dependent on the food source provided by the local farmer, who sows one or two hectares of bird-friendly seed crops. These flocks are usually small and generally in single figures but the winter of 2013-14 produced a large flock which reached a maximum of 80. They can be very difficult to count as they often spend much of their time hidden in the middle of hawthorn hedges and because of this they are best counted in flight. I have heard that substantial number of Tree Sparrows occur at Red House farm only one kilometre to the south where they provide substantial feed for winter birds.
*Chaffinch	This is a resident breeding in small numbers but with large numbers present in winter. Historically flocks of well over a thousand have occurred but peak numbers are usually below 300. They often feed out in the open in the middle of large fields. These flocks are always worth checking as they often include many other finches and buntings.

Brambling	This is a regular winter visitor but usually only in single figures. There is an obvious passage of birds in mid-October. My recording of Bramblings improved once I started using a telescope in that I found that I could frequently find a few in the Chaffinch flocks feeding in the large fields. Many of these would not have been visible with binoculars. There is a noticeable spring passage in late March to early April which I have also noted in my garden in South Manchester. Usually this is just a handful of birds but is notable by not being associated with Chaffinches and this is also after the small number of wintering Bramblings have left. The most dramatic movement was from 27 <sup>th</sup> March to 1 <sup>st</sup> April in 2014 when there was a group which peaked at 45 birds (and there was not a Chaffinch in sight!).
*Greenfinch	Greenfinches are a regular resident species usually only in small numbers. In the winter a few are often seen mixed in with other finches in the fields, but they do sometimes form flocks of up to 40.
*Goldfinch	This is a common resident species in small numbers with winter flocks of up to about 30, but is more usually seen in much smaller groups.
Siskin	Siskins are only winter visitors here and their numbers vary from year to year. This variation is probably due to the availability of food elsewhere. In some years the winter flocks can reach double figures with a maximum recorded of 35. However the winter of 2014-15 produced only a single bird and the winter of 2016-17 was almost as poor. The usual arrival date is mid-October but there was also an unusual summer influx of Siskins which started in July 2015 and these birds remained until the following winter.
*Linnet	A regular resident with large numbers in winter. A few pairs breed but the winter flocks are often over 100, and sometimes exceed 400. These often join up with the plentiful Chaffinches to form large flocks in the fields.
Redpoll	This is mainly a scarce winter visitor in very small numbers from September to February. Most records are of birds flying over. In the rest of the year it is rare with only six records in four years. There was a small influx in August 2015 which coincided with a similarly unusual arrival of Siskins. A flock of at least 33 in October 2017 was exceptional for this location.
*Bullfinch	A regular resident but with rarely more than three or four birds seen at any one time. In the autumn slightly larger flocks of up to seven are likely to be family groups.
*Yellowhammer	A regular resident with flocks of over 40 present in some winters. It is possibly declining as a breeding species.

Reed Bunting	This is mainly a winter visitor with regular groups of more than ten but they have occurred in smaller numbers in every month except August. In the summer months singing males are sometimes recorded but only in two small areas and it is just possible that they do occasionally breed.
Corn Bunting	In the past Corn Buntings were a common breeding species here. Unfortunately they can now only be treated as extinct here. The only recent record is of two (one of which was singing) on 30 <sup>th</sup> March 2014. My previous last record of any numbers here was of 25 in April 2007, but some other observers reported Corn Buntings here as late as 2010.



#### Other records of interest

Tern (sp.)	A tern flying overhead on 17 <sup>th</sup> May 2015 could not be identified. It was either a Common Tern or an Arctic Tern but unfortunately it was too high for a satisfactory identification.
Guinea Fowl	Brookheys Farm which is just outside this area has a small number of Guinea Fowl which are allowed to wander. They very occasionally occur within the area, with three records in four years.

#### Species only recorded prior to November 2013.

Shelduck	Two were seen flying over in spring in the late 1990's.
Woodlark	A record of a bird flying over on 28 <sup>th</sup> November 2000 was at the time only the third record for Greater Manchester. This is still a very rare bird in the county with only two more records since.

#### Species only recorded by other observers.

Redstart	Although this is an annual migrant in the nearby Mersey Valley, the only record that I know of from this area is a male seen on 20 <sup>th</sup> April 2008.

## Chapter 8 – Additional experiences

Although this is only a small area I rarely have a visit without recording something of interest. This is not just limited to birds. There are always new things to see and I learn something new every week, and sometimes it is from the people that I meet.

With a small area to cover I concentrate my efforts into the smallest sign of something different. I now try to investigate every unfamiliar sound that I hear. Every once in a while I learn something. Like most birders I was familiar with the nasal call of Willow Tit, but also quite ignorant of its song and other calls. I now have become confident in picking up its song, and even some of its other calls. Over forty years ago I was in total awe of a friend who could easily pick up both the call and song of a Treecreeper. Now it is something that I have finally achieved! Having to find everything in a small area really concentrates the senses. However there are still calls (particularly from the wooded areas) that I hear regularly but I still have no idea what birds are producing these sounds. A perennial problem is with young birds that produce a wide variety of calls which cannot be identified.

It is surprising that there are only two species that I have recorded on every daytime visit – Wren and Carrion Crow. Both Blue tit and Robin have been absent on four visits – how was this possible? I also would have expected that Feral Pigeons would be recorded on almost every day. This proved to be a very poor prediction – the actual occurrence has been less than 80% of the visits made. It is only through keeping long term records that these statistics can become available.

Studying this small area has also given me some insight into the possible conflicts between the farming community and the health of the local environment.

In early 2015 I was asked by a local farmer to do a winter bird count in the Partington area for the “Big Farmland Bird Count” organised by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust. This count is generally for a small area (ideally of about 2 hectares) on a farm and primarily where there is an area of game or wild seed mix or somewhere that supplementary feeding takes place.

I was happy to help with this. As always seems to happen to me the number and variety of birds that I recorded on the specified date was disappointing. A couple of earlier rehearsal visits had been much better. I have also found this when doing garden bird counts where the best birds are always present on the day before or the day after!

In early 2016 this request was repeated but this time it was for a field within this kilometre square. I was more than happy to do this. I was expecting a result as poor as in the previous year so I was astonished that the first bird I saw was a Merlin dashing across the field. I established myself in a sheltered spot, out of the wind, with the sun behind me, and then spent 30 minutes watching everything. Apart from the unexpected lack of Partridges this was a brilliant half-hour. A minimum of 290 Linnets was a good total for this area. Even better for me were six Tree Sparrows in a hawthorn hedge which I had previously thought to be fairly useless apart from the regular Linnets and Greenfinches. I was also surprised by both Robin and Blackbird repeatedly feeding on seed in the middle of the field.

The Tree Sparrows have now been found to be regular in this hedge. This shows that occasionally spending some time concentrating on a tiny area can occasionally highlight previously unknown useful sites for birds. I really should do this more often!

I admit that I cannot agree with everything that farmers do to the environment. In their defence, it appears that in many cases the only way for them to make a realistic income from the land is to use increasingly intensive farming practices. It is good to see that some do take an interest in the local wildlife, and then make the time and effort to do something to try to improve their land for wildlife.

However it should also be noted that this additional work must invoke a cost to the farmer but there are additional EU funds available for those who practise environmentally friendly measures. Whatever one thinks about farmers and their subsidies, and here taking a cynical view, I am unsure as to how many farmers would be able to be so progressive if they had to fund these enterprises entirely by themselves.

## Chapter 9 – The future

Having achieved a total of 100 species in two of the four years here, this will be my target for future years. Of the 120 species that I have recorded here about 80 are reliable and are seen in every year, but the remaining ones vary from uncommon to truly rare. The number of these birds appearing in any year is obviously unpredictable.

It will never be possible to record every bird that occurs here. Some birds may pass through on days when I do not visit, and some may pass me by without me even noticing. A simple example of this is that silent birds flying over will not be noticed whilst I am searching the woods. Also there are times when I see or hear a bird but am unable to identify it - this usually happens with birds flying over. Finally there are birds which are present, but which I hardly ever see – the most obvious example is owls which I rarely record because I hardly ever visit this area at night.

As farming continues to intensify there is likely to be increased pressures on the species which primarily feed on weed seeds. Additionally there is the risk that hedges will not be maintained and that they will then be allowed to degrade. The birds that use hedges for cover and for nesting will then decrease. The hedges here appear to be well maintained.

Some species are declining here due to changes outside this area. Gulls flying over are still common, but the numbers have dramatically reduced as landfill sites continue to be closed. The latest to go is Arpley landfill at Warrington which was closed in December 2016; this provided food for up at least 15,000 gulls in the winter. It seems likely that landfill sites will eventually be a thing of the past, and this will result in a reduction of inland records of large gulls.

As well as noting the birds that I have recorded here, I also keep a list of species that I think that I should be able to find. This is generally of birds that have regularly occurred in the surrounding area, but not yet here. It only includes those which have a realistic chance of occurring here. Some of the birds regularly occurring nearby are totally unlikely as there is no suitable habitat available within this square and these have been excluded. A good example of this is that Coots breed within less than a kilometre away but I would never even hope to see them here. When I started in 2013 this list of possible species included a total of 31. Within two years I had recorded over half of them and the list was down to 15. The majority of the remaining species are of ducks and waders which could be expected to occasionally be seen flying over. With enough time most of these should eventually occur.

Additionally I have a wish list of birds that cannot realistically be expected, but which I would really like to find. None of these are totally impossible as I have recorded all of them within ten kilometres, but they remain so unlikely here as to probably remain just a fantasy. However the important thing is that they are not impossible. This list started with 25 species and surprisingly within two years I had recorded ten of them. The best so far have been Little Egret, Red Kite and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. The last of these was only the fourth that I have found in Greater Manchester in forty years.

Species remaining on this wish list include Hen Harrier, Crane, Great Grey Shrike, Yellow-browed Warbler, Crossbill and Snow Bunting. There is a point in having a list such as this. It concentrates my mind to the possibilities and at the right times of the year I always check the hedges for a Great Grey Shrike or the sycamores for a Yellow-browed Warbler. One day I might find one of these!

As might be expected the number of new species that I see each year is diminishing. However there are still about 30 species which are just about possible here and there is always the chance of a totally unexpected bird. So far the only ones have been Mandarin Duck and Black-tailed Godwit which I had never considered as even possible!

Finally there is always the possibility of a true vagrant. In 1943 a "Black Wheatear" was recorded nearby (the exact location is not documented) and its identification was accepted at the time. However this identification was many years later deemed inconclusive. Whatever this bird was it was likely to be exceptionally rare!

However unlikely it may be, if an equally rare bird were ever to occur here, any publication of its location could result in a major influx of visitors. There is insufficient parking in this area for more than a handful of vehicles and a large numbers of cars could cause a major problem for the few people who live here. Most birdwatchers are responsible and thoughtful, but as with any group there will always be a small number who neither think nor care about their actions. These are the ones who can cause problems. Therefore if such a bird occurred here its presence could not be published until after it had left. This is a major and continuing item of controversy amongst birdwatchers.

## ***Appendix 1 - Other fauna and flora.***

Although I have little expertise in recording wildlife other than birds, I can include the following comments on the other things I have noted within this area:

### **Mammals.**

1. Rabbits are regularly seen but only in small numbers. They are most frequently seen in the area around the long demolished Heath Farm. I have been informed that Myxomatosis is present in the area.
2. Hares are rarely seen, mainly along Dark Lane. Their distribution probably depends on the crops planted and varies from year to year.
3. Weasels are very occasionally seen – maybe once a year.
4. I have seen a Stoat twice in four years so it may be considered less common than the weasel.
5. Foxes are probably common here but they are very rarely seen. I see them no more than two or three times a year. In contrast to urban foxes, those here immediately flee as soon as they see a human, even at a range of over 200 metres or more. This situation is quite different to the situation in the suburbs of south Manchester. There the foxes do not perceive humans as a threat and I regularly see foxes and often at close range.
6. I have seen Mink only twice (both times in the brook) but they are very wary and they may be resident here. A common mistake is for inexperienced observers when seeing a Mink is to assume that it is an Otter. The nearest definite location for Otters is on the River Bollin where they have been present since at least 1995 but that population currently appears to be static and not expanding. Therefore Otters are at present most unlikely to occur here.
7. Information from a local farmer is that Badgers are common here. The only evidence I have seen is rows of shallow digging along Dark lane, but I have never seen a live Badger. A dog-walker with whom I often chat saw a young badger in daylight on Dark Lane in May 2017.
8. I have never seen a hedgehog here, but in 2017 I heard noises typical of a hedgehog within an area of brambles. This noise continued for many minutes, but unfortunately I never saw anything.
9. Grey Squirrels are common here and not only in the woodlands. They are also often seen out in the open fields well away from cover, moving between the wooded areas.
10. Molehills are regular in some areas and I have also found a dead mole on Dark Lane. They seem to be present wherever there is undisturbed grassland, most of which is found along the banks of Sinderland Brook.
11. Rats are only occasionally seen but are probably widespread.
12. Other small mammals are occasionally detected but they are mainly heard and not seen. I have seen a Water Shrew swimming in the brook, and also have found the corpse of a Common Shrew. The only other species definitely identified is the Wood Mouse which I have seen twice at very close range.
13. There is no evidence of Deer being present here.
14. I have no knowledge or experience of bats so I cannot comment on their status here. The habitat appears quite suitable, with plenty of dead wood and suitable holes.

### **Other animals.**

- 1 Frogs and frogspawn are frequently seen in spring but I have not seen any other amphibians.
- 2 I have not seen toads here but they used to be frequent just to the north of here, but their current status is unknown.
- 3 I have no evidence of any reptiles here.

### Insects.

- 1 The dragonflies and damselflies seen here are what would be expected. The lack of ponds means that there are no permanent populations apart from the Banded Demoiselle which is frequently recorded on the brook and the surrounding woods. Common Darters appear until late October. Four spotted chasers have been recorded in May.
- 2 Various butterflies and other insects have been recorded, but I have no records which could be classed as unusual for this region.
- 3 There is still a wide variety of insect life. Most are harmless and some are beautiful. However the blood sucking insects can be a hazard to the visitor. This problem is mainly on the north side of Carrington Moss (especially near the Shell Pond) but except in prolonged hot spells of weather I have had few problems in my study area. The only guidance that I can give to anyone nervous of insects and who wants to avoid this problem is to use a good insect repellent. Even this, whilst preventing bites, does not reduce the number of flies circling around. If you really can't cope with hordes of flies, I would suggest avoiding the summer months entirely, or at least only visit in cool, damp or windy weather. The period June to August really isn't really that good for birds, so you are unlikely to miss much by limiting your visits to the period September to May.

### Flowering plants.

- 1 There are two small colonies of Northern Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza purpurella*) in uncultivated grassland near to Sinderland Brook. In 2017 there were over one hundred flowering spikes. The presence of this species indicates a lack of disturbance for many years. This area appears to not be useful for farming, so it may survive for many years. Another orchid, the Broad leaved Helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*) also occurs along the derelict railway line only a few hundred metres to the west and is also possible here.
- 2 Wild Garlic is very common in Sinderland Green Woods. This dies down well before the Himalayan Balsam can crowd it out, so it seems to be unaffected by the influx of this alien species.
- 3 There are some traditional woodland species which are still common within Sinderland Green Woods. These include Wood anemone, Lesser Celandine, Dog's Mercury and Bluebell. These also appear to be unaffected by the colonisation of Himalayan Balsam.

### Fungi.

- 1 The Dark Lane Nature Reserve has large amounts of Jew's Ear fungus (*Auricularia auricula-judae*) growing on dead Elder bushes. I used to harvest this for a Chinese neighbour, as she could only otherwise buy this in its imported dried form. I have now shown her where to find it for herself.

## ***Postscript***

Although I have tried to be as accurate as possible, there could be a few factual errors in this document. If any reader finds any errors in this document then I would ask you to contact me so that I can correct my mistakes.

Email: [JEFFCL0001@gmail.com](mailto:JEFFCL0001@gmail.com)



## ***Acknowledgements***

The website <http://www.VisionofBritain.org.uk> has maps which are helpful in understanding this landscape. I have used one map from this very useful website. This site uses historical material which is copyright of the Great Britain Historical GIS Project and the University of Portsmouth.

Similarly the website <http://maps.cheshire.gov.uk/tithemaps> is a wonderful resource for historical research of this area and I have reproduced one map from here.

I have also received many items of interesting information from people that I have met in the area. For many of these I do not know their names and so I am unable to acknowledge their helpful contributions individually.







*A one kilometre square of apparently mundane farmland could seem to be an unpromising prospect for birdwatching. This area is basically flat farmland with degraded hedges, fragments of old woodland and a small brook.*

*I wondered how much I could learn if I intensively studied the birds in such a small area as this. This is the challenge that I set myself in late 2013.*

*Four years later, I find that there are still things to discover and I continue to learn about this landscape, and it is only now that I can claim that I am beginning to understand it.*

*My hope is that any birder who enjoys studying a home patch may find some items of interest here.*