

Short Report on Benson Parish Bird Survey, 1 June 2022

Mike Pollard, June 2022

Introduction

Benson Parish Bird Survey was established early in 2022 to gather information on the bird populations along a stretch of the River Thames within Benson Parish, with an extension beyond the parish boundary to the north to finish at Shillingford Bridge.

The transect route includes a very good range of habitats including river with some fringing reedbed, wet meadows (currently un-managed), arable farmland (nearby but not adjacent to the transect), houses with large gardens and a couple of small woodlands.

The purpose of the survey is to provide [Benson Nature Group](#) with baseline data on current bird populations, especially species those species associated with the series of riverside meadows in transect sections section three to seven. This data can then be used to support the future development Benson's Green Network and enable people to experience nature and reap the multiple benefits of high-quality green space.

I was asked to make a survey visit to support the volunteer's contribution and provide some initial thoughts on the bird conservation value of the transect route.

Survey methods

The survey is carried out along a transect route which is divided into seven sections, see Figure 2. A standard reporting form was created for use by volunteer surveyors, with the aim of achieving weekly survey coverage from May to September.

I conducted a survey visit on 1 June 2022, starting at 06:00 and completing the transect route at 07:20.



Figure 1 Male Grasshopper Warbler, singing

Route Description	Start at lock-keeper's cottage on far side of the weir in Preston Crowmarsh	
Stage/Map Colour	Stage	Directions
2	Freston Crowmarsh to end of Rivermead	From lock-keeper's cottage to entrance gate from Rivermead into Waterfront by café
Waterfront Strip		From Waterfront café along river to gate at end of holiday lodges
3	Flood Meadow 1 (FM1)	From gate to diagonal path back to A4074; up/back along this path; stop at bridge at entry to FM2
4	Flood Meadow 2 (FM2)	From bridge to kissing gate at end of FM2 (parish boundary)
5	Flood Meadow 3 (FM3)	From kissing gate to gate leaving FM3 (just before Pill Box among willows on right)
6	Flood Meadow 4 (FM4)	From Pill Box gate to end of flood meadows at the start of path along woods
7	(Optional if you have time) Woodside Path	From start of woods to Shillingford Bridge

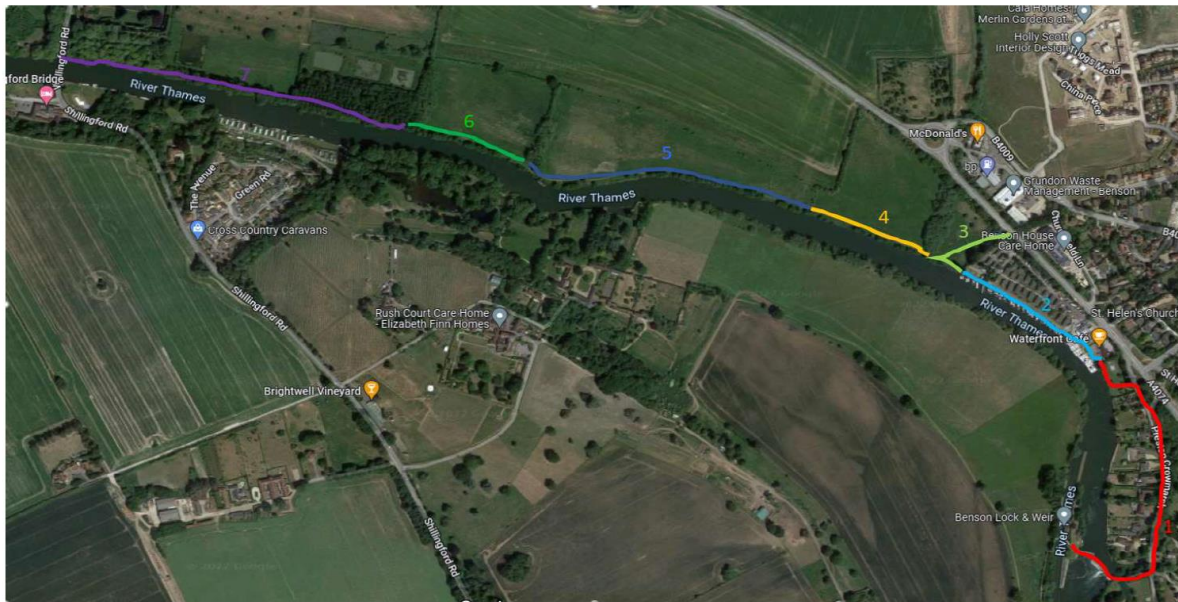


Figure 2 Survey Route

Survey results

I recorded 49 species during the survey, which is a very good total for a relatively short time spent observing – reflecting the good diversity of habitats present.

A full list is appended.

Of particular note is a number of notable species breeding in the unmanaged meadow habitat in sections three to six. These included a singing Grasshopper Warbler (Figure one, [Red List](#), and present on earlier visits per Philip Murray), and the following species all feeding young: Reed Bunting (Figure 4, Amber List), Whitethroat (Green List) and Sedge Warbler (Green List).

Other notable sightings include a pair of Common Terns holding territory (including chasing a Red Kite) at Benson Lock and Weir, both Grey Wagtail (Red List) and Kingfisher along the River Thames, and Lesser Whitethroat (singing in hedge at back of meadow on transect 6). A couple of Reed Warblers were singing in the small patches of Common Reed beside the river at Benson Lock and Weir.

Discussion

It is difficult to draw too many conclusions from a one-off visit, but it is clear that the unmanaged meadow habitat in transect sections three to six is a valuable habitat for several birds species including one that is scarce nationally and [very localised within Oxfordshire](#) - Grasshopper Warbler - and at least three likely to be notable in a local context – Whitethroat, Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting.



Figure 3 Tall Herb Fen type vegetation, transect section 4, 1 June 2022

Each of the four sections has a slightly different character:

Section three is largely comprised of tall herbs of a ruderal nature - indicating ground disturbance relatively recently.

Section four (Figure 3) appears to be a tall herb fen with some interesting floristic interest including Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* and Yellow Flag Iris *Iris Pseudacorus*.

Section five appears to be largely species poor tall herb and grass, with a very few scattered brambles.

Section six appears to be a tall herb fen.

A survey by a suitably qualified ecologist would be required to determine the precise vegetation type.

Traditionally, riverside meadows would have been managed by a taking a hay cut in summer, followed by aftermath grazing. In some cases, more continual grazing may have taken place without a hay cut. However, in the absence of management, the development of tall, tussocky, vegetation with very early-stage successional scrub (a few scattered

brambles) has enabled these fields to be used by the breeding birds mentioned earlier, and any future re-introduction of management would not favour them and is very unlikely to be tolerated by Grasshopper and Sedge warblers. Certainly, the current low-intervention management can be viewed positively in terms of the bird conservation interest of the area. Without management it is likely that a slow process of succession to more scrub will occur, in which case periodic management (e.g. a hay cut or scrub clearance) would be needed to maintain the current interest.

A couple of the fields appear to be damper – four and six – and there may be potential for these fields to retain wetter conditions by intercepting drainage into the river, but this would require a preliminary study to assess the hydrology of the site, prior to drawing up any proposals.



Figure 4 Male Reed Bunting, singing

Report by Mike Pollard Ecology for Wild Oxfordshire

Appendix – Survey Report Form, 1 June 2022

Benson Parish - Bird Survey Record Sheet																	
Area: Flood Meadows				Date: 01/06/2022				Temp °C									
Start Time : 06:00				Finish Time: 07:20				Wind Speed (Please circle): Calm Breezy Windy									
Name of Surveyor Mike Pollard										Cloud Cover (Please circle): Full Patchy Clear							
Species Name	Number of birds recorded for each transect section								Species Name	Number of birds recorded for each transect section							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
Canada Goose	2	2						4	Green Woodpecker					1			1
Greylag Goose								0	Gtr Sptd Woodpecker	1						1	2
Egyptian Goose								0	Coal Tit								0
Mute Swan		2						2	Blue Tit	3	1					1	5
Gadwall					2			2	Great Tit	3		2	1	1		2	9
Mallard	2				2			4	Long-tailed Tit	1						1	2
Tufted Duck								0	Skylark								0
Wigeon								0	Swallow		3			2			5
Goosander								0	House Martin								0
Red-legged Partridge								0	Sand Martin								0
Pheasant					1		1	2	Cetti's Warbler								0
Swift	8	3						11	Willow Warbler								0
Cuckoo								0	Chiffchaff							1	1
Woodpigeon	10	2	2	1	5	2	8	30	Sedge Warbler			1	2	3	1	1	8
Collared Dove	2							2	Reed Warbler	2			1	1			4
Stock Dove						1		1	Grasshopper Warbler						1		1
Water Rail								0	Blackcap	3	1		1	1	2	2	10
Moorhen	1	1			1			3	Garden Warbler								0
Coot								0	Whitethroat				2	2			4
Great Crested Grebe								0	Goldcrest	1							1
Black-headed Gull								0	Wren	4	1	2	3	3		4	17
Herring Gull								0	Nuthatch								0
Lesser Blk-backed Gull								0	Treecreeper	1							1
Snipe								0	Starling		2						2
Lapwing								0	Blackbird	10		1	1	1		2	15
Curlew								0	Fieldfare								0
Common Sandpiper								0	Redwing								0
Golden Plover								0	Song Thrush			1		1		2	4
Common Tern	1					1		2	Mistle Thrush								0
Cormorant	1				1			2	Robin	2	1					3	6
Grey Heron							1	1	House Sparrow		2						2
Little Egret								0	Dunnock	1	2					1	4
Sparrowhawk					1			1	Pied Wagtail	1	3			1			5
Red Kite					1		1	2	Grey Wagtail	2						1	3
Buzzard								0	Meadow Pipit								0
Kestrel								0	Chaffinch	2			1	1		1	5
Hobby								0	Greenfinch								0
Barn Owl								0	Goldfinch	2	3	1		3			9
Tawny Owl								0	Bullfinch								0
Little Owl								0	Linnet				2				2
Kingfisher	1						1	2	Siskin								0
Jay							1	1	Yellowhammer								0
Magpie			1			1		2	Reed Bunting				1	7	1		9
Jackdaw	1	1						2	Corn Bunting								0
Rook								0	Lesser Whitethroat						1		1
Carrion Crow	1	2					3	6									0
								0									0

Sighting Notes - use this box to note any details relating to sightings - e.g. specific location, juveniles, singing, feeding etc.

Mute Swan pair with 5 cygnets.

Section 5 - two female reed buntings carrying food, two sedge warblers carrying food, whitethroat carrying food - seems to be at peak chick feeding stage for those species.

Common Tern chasing off Red Kite in section 1

Song Thrush carrying food. Fledged young of Pied Wagtails, Great and Blue tits, Blackbird, Wren