

Nature Notes 6: Changes in Bird Populations in Swannington

While walking from Kett's Lane to Brandiston recently I was startled when a flock of *seventeen* snipe suddenly sprang up just in front of me emitting their sharp "*schaap*" alarm calls as they flew zig-zagging away. I have never seen so many snipe together before. Almost always when I have seen them previously they have been solitary or occasionally a pair.

A regular indicator of the arrival of spring in Swannington used to be to hear male snipe "drumming" as part of their breeding display in the meadows both east and west of the Village Green. They would fly up and then dive obliquely down, holding the outer tail feathers at a sharp angle to the rest of the tail so that as the air rushing past them it created the distinctive "drumming" sound. Sadly I write in the past tense because although this was a common sound, I have not heard any snipe displaying here for over 25 years. This reflects a widespread trend of decline throughout the country of 62% between 1982 and 2002.



A snipe drumming

Other breeding waders in England and Wales have shown similar drastic decreases, for example lapwings, once common on farmland, have declined by 80% since 1960, mostly due to changes in agricultural practices; redshank decreased by 60% between 1970 and 2010; while curlew numbers on upland meadows fell by 45% between 1997 and 2011, partly due to changes in grazing intensity but, as for other waders, partly due to a significant increase in predation rate, particularly by foxes, the numbers of which have increased substantially now that there is less emphasis on gamekeeping.



Woodcock "roding" (© desktoprescus)

Woodcock look a bit like a larger version of a snipe but breed in woodlands where they make low croaking "*orrrrt – orrrt*" calls, interspaced with higher pitched sneezing "*tsiwick*" calls during their "roding" flights along woodland edges at dusk. This "roding" behaviour is equivalent to the snipe drumming and was a sight and sound that my son, Matthew, and I never tired of, while we were working late on his hydrology project on Uppgate common on summer evenings about 18 years ago. There is now serious concern about how rapidly they too are declining (29% in the decade between 2003 and 2013) so have now been placed on the "amber list" of species of significant conservation concern.

All is not doom and gloom. Most predatory birds increased in numbers following the bans on organo-phosphate pesticides in the 1960s. Kestrels can often be seen perching on the electricity cables above the meadows on both sides of the Green, watching intently for small mammals in the sward below, while sparrow hawks dash along the hedgerows trying to ambush small songbirds. For the first 35 years that we lived in Swannington, I never heard or saw a buzzard in the parish. Now they can be seen and heard most days circling effortlessly above the meadows behind our house while uttering their characteristic "mewing" calls. Similarly little egrets have increased significantly over the last decade and can now often seen where the meadows border the Beck.



Buzzard soaring (© Walter Baxter)



Little egret (©Albert Bridge)

Working out the reasons for these changes in our farmland bird populations is the subject of extensive research, particularly by the British Trust for Ornithology who would particularly welcome any records of woodcock sighted during the spring and summer.