

## A SURVEY OF BREEDING BIRDS AT HEATHERCOMBE VALLEY AND LOWER LANGDON

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### Aims.

This survey supplements the ecological survey and management advice contract carried out in 2005. It aims to provide a more detailed assessment of the breeding birds and to examine which areas of Heathercombe Valley are used by which species. Additionally it looks at the unplanted part of Lower Langdon to find out whether the high botanical and ecological interest of the site extends to its breeding birds.

### Methods.

All areas of Heathercombe Valley and the unplanted part of Lower Langdon were visited once during each of the three months April-June. All visits were made during the morning, as bird activity tends to be less in the afternoon. Two morning visits were needed to cover Heathercombe Valley. All birds present were listed and activity providing evidence of breeding was noted. In practice the majority of records were made by identifying songs. The frequency of each species was assessed, but no attempt was made to count or map territories. The nest boxes were checked on 10th June with Andrew Taylor.

The breeding status of each species was assessed by the system used for county surveys by the Devon Bird Watching and Preservation Society. This uses three categories: possible, probable and confirmed breeding. Possible breeding is indicated by presence of the species in suitable habitat during the breeding season, but with no further indication of breeding activity. Probable breeding is indicated by territorial activity such as song, agitated behaviour or nest building. Confirmed breeding requires evidence such as nests with eggs or young, adults carrying food or the presence of recently fledged young. In practice probable breeding is regarded as adequate for mapping the breeding range of a species.

The results are shown below in two ways: as a list of species with the breeding status and distribution of each, and as a summary of the breeding bird populations of the various habitats within Heathercombe Valley. The results for Lower Langdon are shown separately. In the species list, each species is annotated with a letter indicating the recording code used by the DBWPS. This code is based on how frequent each species is in Devon; very rare species are coded A and very common ones E. No species coded A or B were recorded during this survey.

The list is primarily derived from fieldwork carried out in 2006, with additional information from 2005 where this adds significantly to the result. Four of the species listed were not recorded at Heathercombe in 2005: Green Woodpecker, Redstart, Greenfinch and Reed Bunting.

List of Breeding Bird Species for Heathercombe Valley.

**Mallard.** E. Confirmed breeding. Nests reported at Upper and Lower Lakes by estate staff. A pair was seen at Lower Lake in 2005.

**Grey Heron.** D. Possible breeding. One bird was flushed from the leat on Heatree Down, also one from the pond near Manwood in 2005. However heronries are very obvious, and it is unlikely that this species could breed unknown to estate staff.

**Buzzard.** D. Confirmed breeding. A young bird was heard calling on the south-eastern side of the woodland in 2005. Adults were seen flying over woodland and Heatree Down. There is a large nest in Bluebell Wood which is probably a disused nest of this species. Estate staff are not aware of any nest currently in use.

**Woodpigeon.** E. Probable breeding. Song was heard in all conifer areas, most frequently in the valleys, but the population does not appear to be large.

**Cuckoo.** C. Probable breeding. Both male and female were calling in flight over woodland and Heatree Down in April and May.

**Tawny Owl.** C. Probable breeding. There were no records during the survey, but residents have reported hearing them at night.

**Green Woodpecker.** C. Possible breeding. One was heard calling near Fairy Wood in May.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker.** D. Possible breeding. One was present in the southern valley plantations in April.

**Skylark.** D. Probable breeding, but perhaps not within the Trust's boundary. Song was heard across the road on the main part of Heatree Down, but only once, in June, on the Trust's side close to the road junction.

**Swallow.** E. Confirmed breeding. A maximum of three birds was seen near the houses in May and June. Estate staff reported nests in the porch of North Heathercombe and an outbuilding at South Heathercombe.

**Meadow Pipit.** E. Possible breeding. A maximum of three birds was seen in the Trust's part of Heatree Down in May and June, but no song was heard.

**Grey Wagtail.** D. Confirmed breeding. Estate staff reported nests at South Heathercombe and Manwood. Birds were seen at North Heathercombe, on Manwood drive and at Lower Lake; young birds were at the latter two locations in June.

**Pied Wagtail.** E. Possible breeding. Single birds were seen at North Heathercombe and on Manwood lawn in 2005. There were no records in 2006.

**Dipper.** C. Possible breeding. One bird was seen by Andrew Taylor at the pond near Manwood in 2005. However breeding is unlikely; the only suitable habitat is in areas where they would have been seen by estate staff.

**Wren.** E. Confirmed breeding. Song was commonly heard in all woodland areas and once on Heatree Down. They were particularly numerous in the southern valley plantations. A family party was seen by the stream in the Newtake, and another in the southern valley in 2005.

**Duncock.** E. Probable breeding. Song was heard in the gorse area of Heatree Down (maximum three males), also near the houses and on the northern boundary.

**Robin.** E. Confirmed breeding. Song was heard frequently in all wooded areas; a recently fledged young bird was seen in Mill Wood, and estate staff reported a nest near the car park.

**Redstart.** C. Probable breeding. Song was heard in April in the line of beeches on the south-western slopes. In May two males were chasing each other on the

woodland edge of Heatree Down near the drive, and a female was seen just across the drive on the edge of Margaret's Wood.

**Blackbird.** E. Probable breeding. There were very few records in April. In May and June song was heard and birds were seen most commonly in broadleaf woodland and gardens. In June they were also heard and seen in the plantations, where they tended to favour the woodland edges.

**Song Thrush.** D. Confirmed breeding. Song was heard in all wooded areas and gardens, though the birds were widely spaced. A recently fledged young bird was seen in larch woodland below Heathercombe Brake in May.

**Mistle Thrush.** D. Probable breeding. A few birds were heard singing, widely scattered in Fairy Wood, Burn Wood, the southern valley and the western slopes.

**Grasshopper Warbler.** C. Probable breeding. Andrew Taylor heard one bird singing in the boggy margin of South Heathercombe field in early June 2005. A single record of song must be treated with caution, as birds can sing on passage, but at that time of year it had probably settled.

**Whitethroat.** C. Probable breeding. In 2005 two males were singing on the edge of Heatree Down near the drive, one in gorse and one in bramble. There were no records in 2006. This was odd, as they were more common than usual in other local moorland areas.

**Garden Warbler.** C. Probable breeding. One singing male was heard in bushes near South Heathercombe in May, and also nearby below North Heathercombe in 2005, when two birds were seen - probably a pair, though the sexes look alike.

**Blackcap.** D. Probable breeding. Song was heard in Fairy Wood and open areas around Manwood and the other houses; also in the north-western larch plantations, but here they were confined to the power line wayleave below Heathercombe Brake and the western woodland edge.

**Wood Warbler.** C. Probable breeding. In May song was heard on the edge of Fairy Wood near the drive and below the power lines. There was no further record in these areas, but in June two birds were singing in the area of Burn Wood, one on the orchard side and one opposite in a small block of spruce. In 2005 song was heard in Fairy Wood and in the larches above the Orchard. These records are significant, as this species has declined markedly in these two years, and there were none in the Bovey Valley in 2006.

**Chiffchaff.** E. Probable breeding. Widely scattered single birds were heard in Fairy Wood, Margaret's Wood, around Manwood, in the southern valley, the north-west larch slopes and the Newtake - probably little more than half a dozen males.

**Willow Warbler.** D. Probable breeding. Single birds were heard on Heatree Down, at Heathercombe Brake and on the moorland behind it (where a bird was seen carrying nest material), and near the young fir plantation on the western boundary.

**Goldcrest.** E. Probable breeding. Song was heard mainly in the conifer plantations in the northern and southern valleys, on the north-western slopes and in the Newtake, becoming frequent in June. There were also single records from Fairy Wood and the Manwood arboretum.

**Spotted Flycatcher.** C. Confirmed breeding. A pair nested in a hedge (an unusual location for this species) at South Heathercombe. One was also seen on overhead wires at North Heathercombe in 2005.

**Pied Flycatcher.** C. Confirmed breeding. In May three males were singing by the Manwood drive, at Lower Lake and at Heathercombe Brake. In June occupied nest

### Analysis of the Distribution of Bird Species at Heathercombe.

The breeding birds listed above can be divided into four groups according to their habitat preferences. (These groups are based on the evidence provided by this particular survey, and may not be more widely applicable.) Species recorded only rarely during the survey have not been included.

**Generalist woodland species** were found in all wooded habitats: conifer plantations, broadleaf woodland and open woodland. Wren, Robin and Chaffinch were common, with smaller numbers of Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Chiffchaff, Great Tit and Carrion Crow.

**Broadleaf and open woodland species** were found in Fairy Wood and Burn Wood, and in mixed, open woodland including the Manwood grounds and arboretum, the surroundings of Heathercombe Brake and Lower Lake, gardens and field margins. They comprised Grey Wagtail, Dunnock (also on heathland), Redstart, Blackbird, Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Wood Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Pied Flycatcher, Blue Tit, Nuthatch, Siskin and Bullfinch. (Swallows bred around the houses, but they are birds of open country rather than woodland.) Blackcap, Blue Tit and Siskin were the most frequent of these, but all were in fairly small numbers. Some of these species, notably Blackbird, Blackcap and Wood Warbler, were also found on the edges of conifer plantations. Pied Flycatcher and Blue Tit used nest boxes in conifers adjacent to open ground. Redstarts were associated with mature beech. Siskins, though normally breeding in conifer plantations, were seen mostly in mixed ornamental areas.

**Conifer woodland species** found only or mostly in the plantations comprised Woodpigeon, Goldcrest, Coal Tit, Treecreeper and Jay. The most frequent were Goldcrest and Coal Tit which are generally common in conifers, though not confined to them. The other three species are not normally conifer specialists.

**Heathland species** found on Heatree Down comprised Cuckoo, Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Dunnock, Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, Linnet and Reed Bunting. The most numerous species was Dunnock, which is also a bird of gardens and bushy areas. Willow Warbler was also noted on the moorland above Heathercombe Brake. Cuckoos were also heard over the woodland, but were probably flying across to adjacent moorland. All these species were scarce, but the Trust's part of Heatree Down is a small part of a larger block of heathland which may hold larger populations.

### Conclusions.

Heathercombe Valley has a fairly good range of breeding birds, with 31 species recorded as probable or confirmed. These include three of the specialist birds of western upland oakwoods: Redstart, Pied Flycatcher and Wood Warbler. However the numbers of these are low, probably two or three pairs of each. Breeding Grasshopper Warbler is also significant, but with only one record of song this needs further confirmation. Spotted Flycatchers are also uncommon these days, and rarely seen in the Manaton area.