

Bird diversity in the Raynhams area: comparison with Earsham in 1970s

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Many animals and plants have declined in recent decades in Britain and the rest of Europe, and some have become locally extinct.

The Raynhams area of north-west Norfolk is considered here in comparison with Earsham in south-east Norfolk from the 1970s.

'Raynhams area' here means mainly South Raynham (near Fakenham) with some notes on East and West Raynham.

Within the Raynhams area, some bird species still appear to be faring quite well. Most are residents, or short-distance partial migrants. An example is **woodpigeon**, numbers of which, nationally, have increased massively in the last few decades, at least doubling since 1970. Others include thrushes (blackbird, song thrush, and mistle thrush), robin, dunnock, wren, five species of tit (great, blue, coal, marsh and long-tailed), and about four finches.

Overall:

- Several species formerly to be expected in the type of countryside to be found in the Raynhams area are now either scarce or completely absent.
- Species such as hirundines and flycatchers that depend on flying insects for food are struggling.
- Winter flocks of finches, buntings, sparrows, skylarks etc are now very scarce on arable land. [Flocks can still be seen to the south-west of South Raynham, near Wellingham.](#)
- Some resident or semi-resident species are faring okay. Some, like woodpigeon, are herbivores. Others depend significantly on ground-dwelling detritivore prey such as earthworms etc. (thrushes, robin, wren, dunnock). Small mammals such as shrews and mole that depend on similar prey are thriving.
- Several raptors have recovered or are recovering from previous extreme lows.
- Many common invertebrates seem scarce, despite apparently suitable habitat. For example, few dragonflies and damselflies are to be seen on the Hillside House plot, even on or near the pond. Numbers may, however, be improving with current plot management.

Comparison with the parish of Earsham in 1970s

During the 1970s I recorded animals and plants in and around the parish of **Earsham** in south Norfolk. Though not very 'scientific', the comparison between the fauna and flora of that area with those of South Raynham from 2013 onwards is still quite interesting, and frankly, alarming.

Several species present then in the Earsham area have been omitted from this comparison. These were found in the Waveney valley floodplain in places with few trees, a habitat type that is missing from the Raynhams area*.

The table below shows that several of the other species that would have been present in the Earsham area in the 1970s seem to be **completely absent** from the Raynhams now. Species names are colour-coded as in *Birds of Conservation Concern 5*. Many are on the **Red List**. (H.H. = Hillside House).

species	Raynhams area (2013 on)	Earsham (1970s)
Sparrowhawk	Present, probably nesting not far from H.H. by R. Wensum. Apparently largely left alone by local game interests. Seen reasonably frequently at H.H.	[In 1970s this species was beginning to recover from effects of DDT poisoning]. Absent from Earsham parish, at least until 1971 or 1972, when a pair returned to Sexton Wood at Topcroft. At the time was still being illegally killed by game interests.
Buzzard	Present, probably nesting not far from H.H. Apparently largely left alone by local game interests. Seen most days at H.H.	Absent from Earsham parish other than as a passage migrant.
Marsh harrier	Like red kite, marsh harrier has recovered from near-extinction in Britain and Ireland. The total breeding population is now around 400 pairs. Breeds not far from S. Raynham in at least two places and seen occasionally at Hillside House.	Absent, no records (except odd overflying wanderers). UK population in 1970s was still very small indeed. (In 1967, population may have been just one male and two females, all at Minsmere in Suffolk).
Red kite	Probably breeds not far from S. Raynham (more than 1 pair?) and seen fairly often at H.H. (record days 2013 to 2022 averaged around 43). The present status of red kite in the UK is undoubtedly one of the great successes of modern conservation.	Absent, no records in Earsham parish, though one overwintered near Hedenham late 1970s. Breeding population in England in 1970s was virtually nil.
Kestrel	Present, probably nest some years close to H.H. in natural hole in ash. Nestbox installed in 2015 was used for the first time in 2022 and three young were fledged.	Situation probably very similar. Certainly nested in natural site at top of broken-off alder tree, near Earsham village.
Hobby	Evidence of breeding in Raynhams area, at low density, was accumulating by 2018. Habitat is promising and there are odd sightings during the summer. Hirundines are rather scarce in this part of the upper Wensum valley and perhaps this keeps numbers low. Dragonfly and damselfly numbers may be rising in response to recent management of the Hillside House plot -- for example, after the creation of a small new pond on the meadow, five species appeared in the following summer.	In the 1970s this species was starting to move into a few places in or near Earsham, at a time when the total breeding population in the UK was rising. Factors favouring these changes were an abundance of hirundines and plenty of suitable old corvid nests. Reduced attention from game interests may have helped (bizarrely this species was formerly one of many persecuted).
Cuckoo	Singing males are now present each year, sometimes two simultaneously. Management work on the damp meadow at Hillside House appears to have improved habitat there and encouraged several potential host species, including reed and sedge warblers and reed bunting.	Present in various places, e.g. Outney Common (Bungay Common).

species	Raynhams area (2013 on)	Earsham (1970s)
Turtle dove	<p><i>This species may be heading for extinction in Britain.</i></p> <p>Apparently completely absent from the South Raynham area. No records at all between 2013 and 2022.</p>	<p>A regular breeder in the Earsham area, for example in a nest in a mock orange shrub on the edge of Earsham village in 1969.</p>
Little owl	<p>Since 2017 the situation for this species round the Raynhams has become much clearer. Within a radius of about 2 km of South Raynham, by 2020 there were thought to be at least five little owl territories. Occasionally individuals appear on the Hillside House plot, once intriguingly right next to a barn owl nestbox.</p>	<p>Resident on arable land outside Earsham village.</p>
Swift	<p>Present at fairly low density in the general area and to be seen in the skies over Fakenham, Hempton, and the Raynhams. Loose, irregular-shaped pantiles used for roofing old houses and farm outbuildings may provide good nesting places. The reliable presence of this species in the skies here during the summer is an indication that food availability is at least adequate.</p> <p>Small numbers are present in South Raynham, though nesting locations are as yet unknown.</p> <p>Attempts to draw swift to nestboxes on Hillside House began in 2022. Although there was no success in the first year, it seems several years often go by before swifts adopt a new site.</p>	<p>Situation in Earsham was probably quite similar, though numbers may have been higher. Certainly nested in roofs of the houses in Queensway.</p>
Lesser spotted woodpecker	<p>Apparently completely absent. No records at all between 2013 and 2022.</p> <p>This species is on the Rare Breeding Birds Panel list (estimated 1000-2000 pairs). Woods by the River Wensum northwards of the A1065 to beyond Raynham Hall look almost ideal for this species yet it seems to be absent. These damp woods contain many deciduous trees with soft timber such as willow and poplar.</p>	<p>Seen intermittently, population may have increased temporarily owing to Dutch elm disease. Alternatively, or in addition, this rather elusive species may simply have become easier to detect on bare trees, though the call carries quite well. Bred locally, for example almost certainly in Bath Hills Woods.</p>
Skylark	<p>Almost certainly present as a breeder on arable land to the south of S. Raynham. No evidence of breeding on meadows or grazing on the north side of the A1065, i.e. in the immediate vicinity of Hillside House plot. Old fields there look promising in places but vegetation may be too long and rank.</p>	<p>Present in good numbers on Bungay Common (Outney Common).</p>

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Swallow	<p>Returned to nest successfully in H.H. shed 2017 (two pairs) and 2018 (one pair).</p> <p>New maintenance methods may have helped to encourage swallows. Areas of grass near the pond are now cut with a topper. An entrance hole was created in the gable wall of the shed specifically to allow access for swallows and barn owl.</p> <p>Previously, from 2014 to 2016, swallows were effectively absent from the Hillside House plot. Old swallow nests were visible inside the shed in the garden, but, although adults occasionally appear briefly in the spring, they did not stay.</p> <p>Swallows are still present in the Raynhams area in small numbers and probably breed at East Raynham. They are present in Hempton and Fakenham.</p>	Relatively common, often over cattle grazing.
House martin	<p>House martins seem to be absent as breeders from much of South Raynham. House martins were definitely nesting in moderate numbers in West Raynham up to summer 2022.</p> <p>The shape of the eaves on many traditional East Anglian houses may not be suitable for house martins to hang their nests there (on other houses the soffets are horizontal and wider).</p>	Relatively numerous, nesting under wide eaves, for example on many houses in Earsham village. Again, probably benefitted from dairy farming.
Garden warbler	<p>Apparently absent as a breeder. Recorded on passage 2015 and 2017.</p> <p>Present in breeding season at various places elsewhere in mid-Norfolk (e.g. Felthorpe).</p>	Scarce, nest found in Denton parish (near Earsham).
Blackcap	Present in suitable habitat in reasonable numbers. In 2015 the H.H. plot alone probably held three territories.	General situation then probably much as for Raynhams now.
Whitethroat	Now a regular breeder on the meadow on Hillside House plot. One or two pairs on the meadow.	Breeding proved on edge of Earsham village, situation probably not much different to that for Raynham area currently.
Lesser whitethroat	<p>Apparently absent as a breeder.</p> <p>Recorded on passage 2015 (brief song from top blackthorn on the meadow), no records 2016.</p>	
Grasshopper warbler	Some habitat near to H.H. looks almost ideal for this species, but so far there are no records.	Not found in the Earsham area (present as a breeder a few miles away on a building site at Holton near Halesworth).

species	Raynhams area (2013 on)	Earsham (1970s)
Reed warbler	<p>Now considered to be an established summer resident on the Hillside House plot. Accurate assessment of numbers may be difficult as individual males might sing briefly before moving on.</p> <p>In the 2022 season total numbers at Hillside House were unclear (kestrels nested and prevented monitoring of the meadow). Perhaps three singing males were present on the main pond, which is more open after fringing trees (diseased ash trees) were removed in 2016/17.</p> <p>In 2020, at least five territories were present on the Hillside House plot.</p> <p>Reed warblers almost certainly bred on the Hillside House plot in 2017 and 2018.</p> <p>In 2015 at least one pair of reed warblers almost certainly nested on the pond at Hillside House and another may have nested in the reedfen parts of the meadow.</p> <p>[In 2015, along the Wensum between the A1065 and East Raynham church (a distance of approximately 1.4 km -- the area of available suitable habitat is approximately 4 hectares), there were probably a further four reed warbler territories.]</p> <p>Probable migrants were present briefly in May 2016 but then moved on.</p>	<p>Bred in reedy area near Earsham church (Stow Fen) mid 1970s (nest found). [Google Earth images indicate this same patch has since been mowed and converted to grazing.]</p>
Sedge warbler	<p>Song in this species seems to last for just a few days for each breeding attempt, after which males become much quieter.</p> <p>Now (2022) a regular breeder at Hillside House.</p> <p>Almost certainly bred in 2018 on the meadow (SW corner). Possibly a different singer was present on the main pond in 2018.</p> <p>Definite successful breeding in 2017 on the meadow (one or more pairs) and immediately west of the meadow (10 metres outside plot boundary).</p> <p>Bred 2016 in north-west quadrant of the meadow. Fledged juvenile seen there (July 3rd). Not seen at Hillside House in 2014 or 2015. Perhaps benefitting from current maintenance methods on the meadow.</p>	<p>Bred in same reedy area near Earsham church as reed warbler, mid 1970s.</p>
Chiffchaff	<p>Situation is very similar to that for blackcap. Present in suitable habitat in reasonable numbers. In 2015 the H.H. plot alone probably held 3, perhaps 4 territories.</p>	<p>Present in taller woods.</p>

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Willow warbler	<p>Occasional song from migrants. One also sang for 1-2 days from a location just of W. Raynham Rd 2017. Perhaps ten singers on Hempton Common 2022.</p> <p>In 2015 there were perhaps two or three territories along the Wensum valley between A1065 and Raynham Hall. These territories (all close to the bridge by East Raynham church) typically contained reeds (<i>Phragmites</i>), <i>Salix spp.</i>, alder and <i>Prunus padus</i> (bird cherry).</p>	<p>Rather scarce as a breeder. Present on Bungay Common (Outney Common).</p>
Whinchat	<p>No records from 2013 to present.</p>	<p>Regular on passage on Bungay Common (Outney Common).</p>
Spotted flycatcher	<p>Of particular interest as, nationally, this species has declined very seriously (see The state of the UK's birds 2014).</p> <p>There are good reasons for thinking that a small breeding population struggles on in the general area of South Raynham. I know that at least one pair almost certainly bred in or near a village churchyard just west of Fakenham in 2015, and a pair with two recently-fledged young was present at Hillside House in August and September 2015. Individuals were present for a few days in the early summer in 2014 but did not apparently stay to breed. In 2016 a pair may have been present in ash woods by the A1065 just south of H.H.</p> <p>A brief survey of nearby villages in 2022 showed spotted flycatcher was present in around 10% of the churchyards visited.</p>	<p>Relatively numerous, though patchily distributed. Probably benefitted from dairy farming, which is rather scarce in the Raynhams (most land is arable).</p> <p>In Earsham there were places where several spotted flycatcher territories could be found in quite a small area. For example, the edge of a single grazing field about 3 hectares in area near Earsham Rectory typically held three or four territories. In a single cricket-bat willow plantation in the River Waveney flood-plain, around 1 hectare in area, three nesting pairs were found in 1975.</p>
Willow tit	<p>Apparently completely absent from the Raynhams area. No records at all from 2013 to present.</p> <p>The decline of this (non-migratory) species in Britain is remarkable. The BTO Atlas of 1976 indicates a total estimated British population of 50000 to 100000 pairs, around that for marsh tit at the time. Willow tits exceeded marsh tit overall by a factor of around 3 to 2.</p> <p>More recently this species has had to be placed on the Rare Breeding Birds Panel list (estimated 3400 pairs in 2009). Willow tit declined by 94% from 1970 to 2012 (see The state of the UK's birds 2014).</p> <p>Its apparent absence from the Raynhams now is therefore not surprising, even though potentially suitable habitat is present (damp woodlands near water features).</p>	<p>Thought to be a regular breeder in damp woods near the River Waveney, though scarce.</p>

species	Raynhams area (2013 on)	Earsham (1970s)
Marsh tit	Like willow tit, marsh tit has also declined seriously (by 71%, 1970 to 2012). However, this species is doing well in the Raynhams area, and is present most days on the Hillside House plot throughout the year. Burdock is a key food plant here.	Present in suitable habitat.
Corn bunting	Apparently completely absent. No records at all from 2013 onwards. This species seems to like large open arable fields with overhead wires and scattered shrubs for songposts. Habitat in the Raynhams area would therefore seem suitable and several areas near South Raynham look promising. Corn bunting is fairly easy to detect in the breeding season -- the song is frequent and carries long distances in open country. (Contrast this with hawfinch, for example). The absence of recent records is therefore a strong indication that the species really is missing.	Certainly bred close to Earsham parish in 1975 -- a nest was found on Flixton aerodrome (to the south of the R. Waveney, in Suffolk).
Yellowhammer	Yellowhammers are present in winter along the lane between South Raynham and Wellingham. Several breeding pairs probably also occur along this lane. This is an area which is being managed in a wildlife-friendly manner. In 2015 singing males occurred in two places along W. Raynham Rd just north of the A1065, one very close to edge of H.H. plot. A few records in the same area for 2016.	Present as a probable breeder along country lanes in mainly arable areas.
Reed bunting	Almost certain breeding from 2015 onwards on the meadow (e.g. adults carrying food repeatedly to same area, June 2016). Seems to be benefitting from current management of this meadow.	
Chaffinch	At Hillside House, chaffinch at least attempts breeding but so far all nests found have failed. The nests have been close to habitation and so may have been deserted through disturbance. Young were successfully reared in 2015 but the location of the nest was unknown, and other chaffinch nests have probably been missed.	Seen frequently, situation probably similar to that currently in Raynhams.
Redpoll	Almost absent. Occasionally seen overflying the plot at H.H. Two feeding on sorrel close to South Raynham church.	Regularly present in winter on alder trees, flocks of 20+. Also certainly bred on Bungay Common (Outney Common) mid-1970s in small pine tree.

species	Raynhams area (2013 on)	Earsham (1970s)
Goldfinch	<p>This species benefits locally from an abundance of thistles, particularly creeping thistle, and breeding success is apparently reasonable. Food sources may only be temporary, however, as fields may be cleared with herbicide and reseeded. Other food-plants of importance here are burdock, ragwort and apparently ash. Outside the breeding season a small flock of goldfinches is fairly reliably present in Hillside House garden, mainly on burdock.</p>	<p>Overall situation probably quite similar.</p>
Linnet	<p>Since about 2018, linnets have become regular breeders on the Hillside House plot. This follows maintenance work to lower tree and shrub heights on the meadow. Linnets also turn up sometimes in small wandering flocks on adjacent arable land. Linnets are present at low densities on arable land more generally near the Raynhams, for example at Whissonsett to the east.</p>	<p>Present on Bungay Common (Outney Common), also at low densities in hedgerows.</p>
Siskin	<p>Occasional flocks appear and hang around for a few days at a time, mainly near the edge of Horseshoe Plantation (to the east of the plot).</p>	<p>Situation in Earsham much as for redpoll, though no breeding records.</p>
Greenfinch	<p>A roost present in the late winter in previous years has virtually disappeared. (This seems to be related to trichomonosis.)</p> <p>The roost began to form in a laurel hedge on the edge of the Hillside House plot in winter 2014/15, and reached a peak of at least 75 individuals by early spring 2015. The pattern was similar in winter 2015/16.</p> <p>A few remain to breed in Hillside House garden and the general area. Interestingly they disappear at the end of the summer (round the end of August) and then are absent for several months, unlike goldfinches (present year-round).</p> <p>Greenfinches are present reliably still in some of the villages east of Fakenham, for example in Kettlestone.</p>	<p>Present in small numbers, often associated with garden evergreens such as yew, pines etc.</p>
Bullfinch	<p>Bullfinches are quite hard to assess, being rather secretive, but there may be three pairs on or very close to the Hillside House plot. Nests are probably in blackthorn thickets and similar.</p> <p>Food plants noted at Hillside House include nettle (seeds), blackthorn (and plum) buds, broad-leaved dock <i>Rumex obtusifolius</i> seeds,</p>	<p>Seen intermittently, situation probably similar to that currently in Raynhams.</p>

species	Raynhams area (2013 on)	Earsham (1970s)
	and deteriorated blackberries.	
Hawfinch	<p>Until 2018, this species was considered absent from the Raynhams area. However, records of two overfliers in 2018 suggest a small breeding population might be present somewhere in this general area.</p> <p>In the UK this species seems to require hornbeam, so given the scarcity of this tree in the Raynhams area, habitat here may be unsuitable.</p> <p>Hornbeam is being planted on the Hillside House plot as a partial replacement for ash, which is in decline owing to ash-dieback.</p> <p>Hawfinch is now on the Rare Breeding Birds Panel list. Estimate in 2011 was 500 to 1000 pairs for Britain. There is some evidence that grey squirrel may be involved in the decline of hawfinch in the UK.</p> <p>Globally hawfinch has an extensive distribution range and its conservation status is designated Least Concern.</p> <p>This species is on the edge of its range in the UK, but its status here still seems somewhat anomalous. Hawfinches may always have been rather scarce, at least since 1900. The range is weighted towards the southern counties, perhaps suggesting that this species could benefit in future from climate change. Hawfinches are very shy, difficult to see, and may be under-recorded.</p>	<p>In the 1970s, hawfinches were present in at least half a dozen woodlands in the Earsham area. All of these woods contained significant amounts of hornbeam, which typically was managed on coppice rotation. An example is Sexton Wood near Topcroft.</p>
House sparrow	<p>Old sparrow nests found in the roof of Hillside House during repair work in 2013 prove that house sparrows formerly nested there. However, they are not here now. Oddly, a small population is present by houses along the A1065 and near Wensum Pools (the nearest are perhaps 50 metres from Hillside House). Yet since 2013 there have been just one or two incidental house sparrow records on the Hillside House plot.</p> <p>The Wensum Pools site is fairly open, with just a few scattered trees. Nearby, chickens are allowed to roam outside, so food may be available year-round on the ground as a result.</p> <p>House sparrows are also present to the north-east at East Raynham on the A1065, where they live year-round on or near a farm. This mini-population probably numbers approximately 20-25 individuals. The farmyard</p>	<p>Present in and around the village, in the 1960s apparently in large numbers, often on roads in the summer. Overall, common or abundant.</p>

species	Raynhams area (2013 on)	Earsham (1970s)
	<p>and derelict cottages close by may provide food and nesting sites. A privet hedge there may provide roosting cover.</p> <p>A roost formed regularly in a very similar hedge close to where I used to live in west Oxford.</p> <p>I noticed around 15+ house sparrows were present in a privet hedge at Kettlestone recently (in 2022).</p> <p>As yet, though, sparrows show no inclination to use the laurel hedge at Hillside House, where greenfinches roost in the winter.</p>	
Tree sparrow	Apparently completely absent. No records at all between 2013 and present.	Nested on the edge of Earsham village late 1960s (right at the top of a tall Scots pine tree). Tree sparrows often formed a significant proportion of roving mixed finch/sparrow/bunting flocks on arable land.
Starling	<p>Apparently absent from South and East Raynham, perhaps present as a breeder in West Raynham.</p> <p>Elsewhere, starlings are present in the general area, perhaps associated with pigfarms. Present in Hempton and in the town of Fakenham (where roosts form in the winter).</p> <p>So far there is no evidence at all that starlings will occupy the nestboxes that were installed at H.H. in 2014. This is despite the availability at Hillside House of areas short grass and presumably plenty of food.</p>	Widely distributed, often on livestock grazing. Nests were in many situations including old sheds and barns, many of which may have since been demolished or converted.
Golden oriole	<p>No records 2013 to present.</p> <p>[A small breeding population became established in the Thetford area but has now disappeared.]</p>	Very strong evidence of at least attempted breeding on Ditchingham Hall estate 1978 (nest, probably of that season, found in July in a poplar tree).

* Note: Species known to be breeding in the near-treeless parts of the Waveney floodplain included **yellow wagtail, meadow pipit** and at least four species of wader (**lapwing, redshank, little ringed plover** and **snipe**).