

Wild Girton

Events and News

Thank you to everyone who came to say hello at the Girton Feast. We're continuing to map the hedgehog sightings in the village so please keep submitting your sightings at Hedgehogstreet.org or send them to us stating time, place, and a photo if possible.

Our Bat walk is set for See the event advert for further details. And on September 6th we'll be holding an Open Evening at our only nature reserve, Town End Close. Details to follow. All welcome.

Birds in Girton

Between the years of 2004 and 2014, Girton resident Ken Sheard wrote a 'Birdwatch' column for the Girton Parish News., reflecting on birds seen in Girton, as well as his own sightings further afield. A group of local volunteers kept Ken supplied with sightings.

Janet Sheard kindly donated copies of those articles to the Local Nature Recovery Plan Group and we thought it would be a fascinating and instructive exercise to compare some of the records from that period with the avifauna we have now.

Some things haven't changed; then as now Ken refers to common sightings of our usual garden residents: Tits, Blakbirds, Dunnocks, Wrens, Green and Great Spotted woodpeckers. House Sparrows are noted as being in decline nationally but Ken does not record any perceived decline in the village. Barn Owls and Kestrels are seen regularly too, as they are now. Back then and still today, our winter thrushes, Fieldfares and Redwings are recorded on the rec.

But all too often, Ken's writings are a lament for decline and loss. In his first article (June 2004), Ken documents Little Owl pairs being present on the Rec, and the Golf Club grounds. We may still have a pair in the north of the village near the Girton-Histon Manor Farm footpath, but sightings are less frequent twenty years on.

Similarly in 2004, Cuckoos were heard calling in Spring, and at least one pair of Spotted Flycatchers (a delicate grey-brown bird that as its name suggests, sallies forth from a perch to snap at passing insects) nested in St Andrew's Church yard. Sadly no longer.

On a number of occasions, Ken refers to Kingfishers being seen down Washpit Lane along the brook there. They are long gone – the only Kingfishers noted in recent years are, unsurprisingly at the Brook Leys wetland in Eddington.

In the November 2006, Ken mentions a disease called Trichomoniasis which had been affecting garden birds in the 'South West and Midlands'. He says it's 'too soon to say whether the disease has reached Cambridgeshire.' By November 2007, Ken documents the disease present on Girton and advises on a regular cleaning regime around bird feeders to try and slow its spread. We too recall the devastating effect the pathogen has had on Greenfinches in particular. In the early 00s we regularly had flocks of 30 to 50 birds in our garden. By the mid-00s they had all disappeared and only reappeared in our garden in the past few years – and in nothing like the numbers they used to.

In parallel with the well documented decline in farmland birds across the country, Ken chronicles their gradual disappearance around the village. The bright yellow Bunting, the Yellowhammer with its 'little bit of bread and no cheese' song, is found 'in hedgerows around the Rec and Ten Acre Field' in 2006, and its drabber cousin, the Corn Bunting is also present.

Lapwings though probably already lost as a breeding bird were still found in large wintering flocks - often in fields bordering 'Gatehouse Lane' (now 'New Road'). In June 2006's article, Ken notes that Grey Partridges 'may be seen in fields surrounding the village'.

In contrast, few Yellowhammers are seen in the village now. The odd pair may linger on in the fields between Histon and Girton. Corn Buntings are long gone. Lapwing flocks may occasionally be spotted (though much smaller than of yore) and the odd bird pitches up at Brook Leys in Eddington. A few Grey Partridges may still be present (one birder notes them as being seen on a 'Histon-Girton circular walks') but in nothing like the numbers they used to.

Is there any good news amongst the gloom? Well yes, some. One group of birds, the raptors seem to have thrived over the years. In November 2005, Ken notes the Buzzard as being 'rare in the Eastern counties'. Yet by the time of Ken's last article in May 2014, he describes the regular 'return of the Buzzards to the village' in Spring. Their rise continues as we note them now in many places around Girton with their familiar 'wheooing' calls.

Similarly, in August 2004 the sighting of a Red Kite (a beautiful large bird of prey with a distinctive forked tail) over Oakington Garden Centre is recorded as a 'rarity'. Ken notes sightings over the village at various points in the 10 years of his column, so that by his last article he can speculate whether they might breed.

Another bird that has increased in numbers, is the Little Egret – an all-white relative of the Heron with black legs and yellow 'slippers' on its feet. The bird has spread widely since it was first noted colonising the UK from the Continent in the 1970's, and while most sightings are in and around the Brook Leys wetland in Eddington, it can pop up anywhere now.

In gardens, the diminutive Goldfinch with its red face, and yellow wing 'epaulettes' (from which it gets its name) has benefited from the increase in bird feeders. Less welcome perhaps, is the parallel rise in the number of Wood Pigeons visiting gardens in pursuit of an easy meal.

Ken Sheard has left us a fascinating chronicle of the birds seen in Girton over the 10 years of his monthly column. We are indebted to him. What changes have you noticed over the years? Let us know by sending your observations to lnrp@girton-pc.gov.uk