



Evaluation of proposed Kent Woods and Downs NNR

ORNITHOLOGY

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
1.0 INTRODUCTION	4
1.1 Background	4
2.0 METHODOLOGY	4
2.1 Spatial coverage	4
2.2 Review of existing data	5
2.3 Field visits	5
3.0 RESULTS	6
3.1 Objective 1: Evaluation of key bird species	6
3.1.1 Birds recorded in NNR area	6
3.1.2 Species of conservation priority	6
3.1.3 Key species: existing data	6
3.1.4 Key species: mapped data	8
3.2 Objective 2: Evaluation of key sites	12
4.0 DISCUSSION	13
4.1 Objective 3: Survey recommendations	13
4.2 Objective 4: Habitat recommendations	14
5.0 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	15
6.0 REFERENCES	15
APPENDICES	16
Bird species from KOS data request	16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an evaluation of a proposed Kent Woods and Downs NNR from the perspective of ornithology. It is intended to be part of a series of evaluations cross taxa and be used in conjunction to prioritise conservation and other management practice.

Ornithological surveys were not undertaken to inform this report due to the unseasonal timing of the contracted work. The evaluation is therefore based on a desk-based review of existing information and expert input and is supplemented by site visits which helped inform understanding of the key sites within the landscape of the proposed NNR.

Existing data for the NNR area, provided via KOS, comprise a total of 178 bird species, which include ~32 red and amber-listed species of conservation concern breeding in the area. Several priority species are present in the area and require further surveys to cement understanding of their distributions. These comprise nationally scarce woodland birds (Marsh Tit, Hawfinch, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker) plus farmland interface priorities (Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting, Linnet, Bullfinch).

Key sites for these priority species based on current data are described in the report. They include Ashenbank Wood, Shorne Woods and Holborough Woodlands for breeding Marsh Tit and Hawfinch. Silverhand Estate and Jeskyn's Country Park support a bird assemblage characteristic of the ecologically important farmland/woodland interface.

In addition, the downland escarpment is potentially a key area for Hawfinch during the winter and needs focused survey effort. Coverage of the area during the respective breeding seasons of scarce birds of prey (Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Hobby, Long-eared Owl) is needed. An appropriate program of surveys is suggested, which could be implemented via a combination of professional fieldwork, volunteer citizen science and use of remote technology. These include project concepts to be considered for Natural England species recovery funding: Marsh Tit, Hawfinch, priority bird/bat species monitoring.

The area comprises different land uses and habitats under different ownerships. There are opportunities for habitat management that could benefit several species of conservation concern. General habitat recommendations are proposed, which can also help to facilitate connectivity across the NNR between areas of ecological value and support stewardship initiatives undertaken either within the NNR and or on adjacent farmland.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Kent Wildlife Trust Consultancy Services (Adonis Blue Environmental) was commissioned by White Horse Ecology to undertake an evaluation of the ornithological importance of a proposed Kent Woods and Downs NNR in north Kent.

This evaluation is one of a series, undertaken by a range of relevant taxa specialists, coordinated by White Horse Ecology under contract to the ultimate client, Kent County Council.

The four core objectives of this report are to evaluate:

- (1) The most important bird species in the proposed NNR area,
- (2) The most important locations for birds in the proposed NNR area.
- (3) Priorities for future ornithological survey work (areas both highlighted and under-recorded).
- (4) Priorities for future habitat creation and management.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Spatial coverage

This evaluation covers a landscape proposed as a possible Kent Woods and Downs NNR. The area comprises a variety of woodland, downland and agricultural land uses, with associated mix of habitat types and interfaces.

It features a network of defined, connected, sites that are of wildlife interest. These are currently categorised as 'core', 'affiliate', and 'possible affiliate' (Fig. 1).

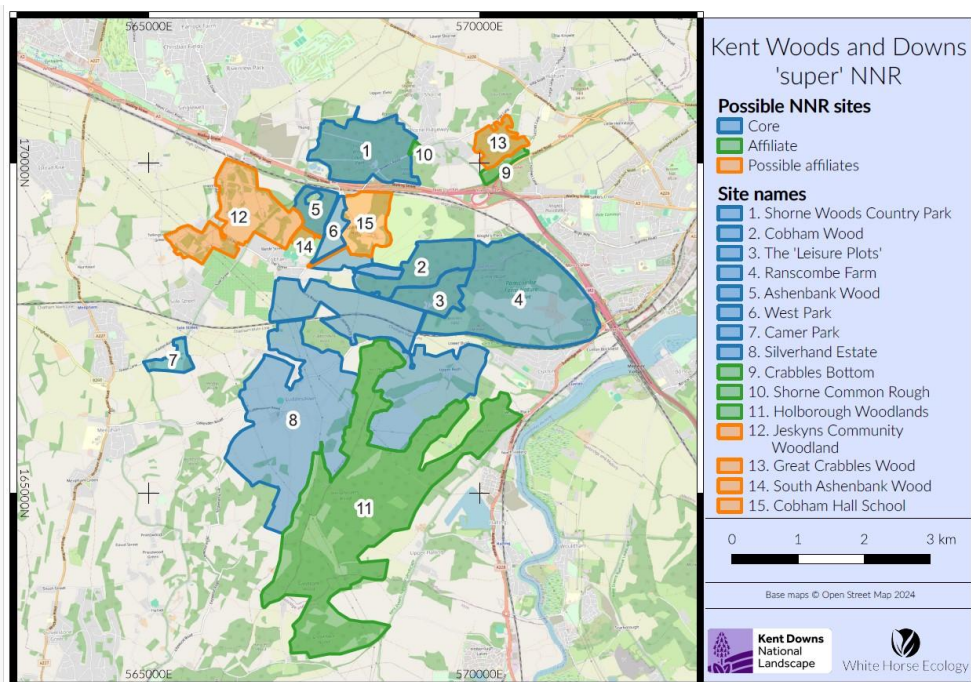


Fig 1. Proposed Kent Woods and Downs NNR area, with key sites listed.

2.2 Review of existing bird data

All existing bird data for the study area were sourced from the Kent Ornithological Society database.

The KOS database search was based on the following Ordnance Survey grid squares: TQ6562, TQ6572, TQ7162, TQ7172. Where available, records were provided to 6-figure grid reference resolution with site name included.

The most recent 10 years' data were sourced for all bird species. Data for species of current conservation priority – red and amber-listed (per Stanbury *et al.* 2021) – were differentiated. These data provide an evidence base for the overall bird assemblage and, depending on coverage, an indication of the presence of species of conservation priority, both nationally (Eaton & Noble 2023) and at county scale (Kent Nature Partnership 2020).

Additionally, 25 years' data were requested for a selection of species known to be (or have been) of special relevance to the sites and habitats within the proposed NNR area. These species are Nightjar, Woodcock, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Woodlark, Skylark, Hawfinch, Marsh Tit, Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting. We subsequently mapped these data.

2.3 Field visits

Visits and focused walkovers were made to the study area by Murray Orchard (MO) on 1 May, 6 June and 26 June, and by Chas Holt (CH) on 26 June. The aim of these visits was to inform understanding of the sites and the NNR area and thereby complemented the desk-based evaluation, facilitated the evaluation of species priorities, survey requirements, and future habitat management recommendations.

Pertinently, MO is familiar with the NNR area from birdwatching there over 20 years ago and has therefore been able to provide especially relevant expert opinion with respect to the contemporary importance for birds within a historical context and the associated opportunities for habitat restoration/creation.

3.0 RESULTS

In this section we address Objectives (1) and (2) of the evaluation: key species, key areas.

Objectives (3) and (4) are addressed in the Discussion.

3.1 Key species

3.1.1 Birds recorded in NNR area

A total of 178 bird species were sourced from the KOS data search for the study area and immediate hinterland.

The full list of species is included as Appendix A.

3.1.2 Species of conservation priority

Of the species in the KOS data search covering the period 2014-2023, approximately 32 of those currently listed as of conservation concern (per Stanbury *et al.* 2021) are considered likely to have bred within the proposed woodland and downs NNR area during the 1994-2003 – these are marked below with an asterisk. The KOS data search included wetland areas adjacent to the River Medway, hence several of the species in the data search are waterbirds – these are marked below with \$.

The number of records in the database is low given the size of the area, an indication of relatively sparse coverage by birdwatchers and a need for surveys to ascertain the status of key species.

Red-listed: Pochard\$, Scaup\$, Turtle Dove*, Swift*, Cuckoo*, Ringed Plover\$, Lapwing, Whimbrel\$, Curlew\$, Black-tailed Godwit\$, Dunlin\$, Woodcock, Herring Gull\$, Hen Harrier, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker*, Merlin, Marsh Tit*, Skylark*, House Martin*, Starling*, Mistle Thrush*, Fieldfare, Spotted Flycatcher*, Nightingale*, Whinchat, House Sparrow*, Tree Sparrow, Yellow Wagtail, Hawfinch*, Greenfinch*, Linnet*, Lesser Redpoll, Yellowhammer*, Corn Bunting*

Amber-listed: Whooper Swan\$, Brent Goose\$, Barnacle Goose\$, Greylag Goose\$, Shelduck\$, Wigeon\$, Shoveler\$, Gadwall\$, Teal\$, Mallard*, Pintail\$, Black-necked Grebe\$, Stock Dove*, Wood Pigeon*, Moorhen*, Oystercatcher\$, Grey Plover\$, Bar-tailed Godwit\$, Knot\$, Snipe\$, Common Sandpiper\$, Green Sandpiper\$, Greenshank\$, Redshank\$, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Tawny Owl*, Marsh Harrier\$, Honey Buzzard, Sparrowhawk*, Kestrel*, Rook*, Sedge Warbler, Willow Warbler*, Whitethroat*, Wren*, Song Thrush*, Dunnock*, Grey Wagtail, Bullfinch*, Reed Bunting*

3.1.3 Key species – additional information

Below we provide detail relating to records sourced for some of the key species listed above, plus for others selected locally relevant species.

Red listed:

Swift – occasional breeding season records from various sites including Ranscombe Farm.

Cuckoo – occasional breeding season records from various sites including Cobham and Holborough.

Woodcock – reports in winter from various sites, but no breeding season records,

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – three records; at Wouldham (January 1999), Jeskyn's (December 2014) and most recently at Ranscombe Farm (June 2020) indicate a presence of this elusive species. *More intensive survey effort of suitable habitat is needed to better ascertain status in the area.*

Marsh Tit – frequently recorded in small numbers from sites with suitable habitat, including Cobham, Luddesdown, Ranscombe Farm and Ashenbank Wood. *Focused survey effort is needed to better ascertain true status in the area.*

Skylark – regular records from suitable habitat across the area.

Nightingale – adjacent to the study area a small concentration of singing males is frequently recorded at Holborough Marsh. Territories also at Wouldham, Lowe Higham and Rede Common.

Tree Sparrow – a single report from Cuxton (November 2018).

Hawfinch – occasional reports, most recently in the Halling area – where, for example, at least two pairs bred in 2020. Other sites with records include Ashenbank Wood, Shorne Ridgeway, Rede Common and Cuxton. *Focused survey effort is needed to better ascertain true status in the area.*

Linnet – records from suitable habitat across the area.

Yellowhammer – records from suitable habitat across the area, including throughout the year at Cobham and Jeskyn's CP.

Corn Bunting – series of records in recent years including small groups in winter at Jeskyns CP and summer sightings near Shorne.

Amber listed

Stock Dove – regular records, particularly from Cobham area.

Tawny Owl – infrequent reports from across the area, including 4 at Ashenbank Wood in March 2021.

Honey Buzzard – two records; Rede Common (October 2013) and Holly Hill (May 2020). *Considering the latter and availability of suitable habitat, survey effort is needed to determine breeding status.*

Kestrel – infrequent reports from across the area.

Willow Warbler – occasional records, including birds apparently on territory in recent years at Rede Common, Shorne, Cobham, and Ranscombe Farm.

Song Thrush – records from suitable habitat across the area.

Duncock – records from suitable habitat across the area.

Spotted Flycatcher – infrequent records, including successful breeding at Shorne Ridgeway (2014).

Bullfinch – records from suitable habitat across the area, including Jeskyn's CP, Luddesdown, Camer Park, Ashenbank Wood, Cobham and Ranscombe Farm.

Reed Bunting – infrequent reports from across the area.

Other noteworthy records

Long-eared Owl – reports near Wouldham in 2013-15 included records in May/June. *Considering this and the availability of suitable habitat, survey effort is needed to determine breeding status.*

Barn Owl – reports from sites during winter. Breeding records are withheld due to Schedule 1 status of the species. *A coordinated program of nestbox monitoring is recommended.*

Firecrest – a small number of records probably underestimate the species' presence. *Focused survey effort is needed to better ascertain true status in the area.*

3.1.4 Priority species maps

Records from the data request are mapped below. These focus on a suite species associated with key habitats of the NNR area; six species of woodland/heath (Figs. 2-6) three of farmland (Figs. 7-9).

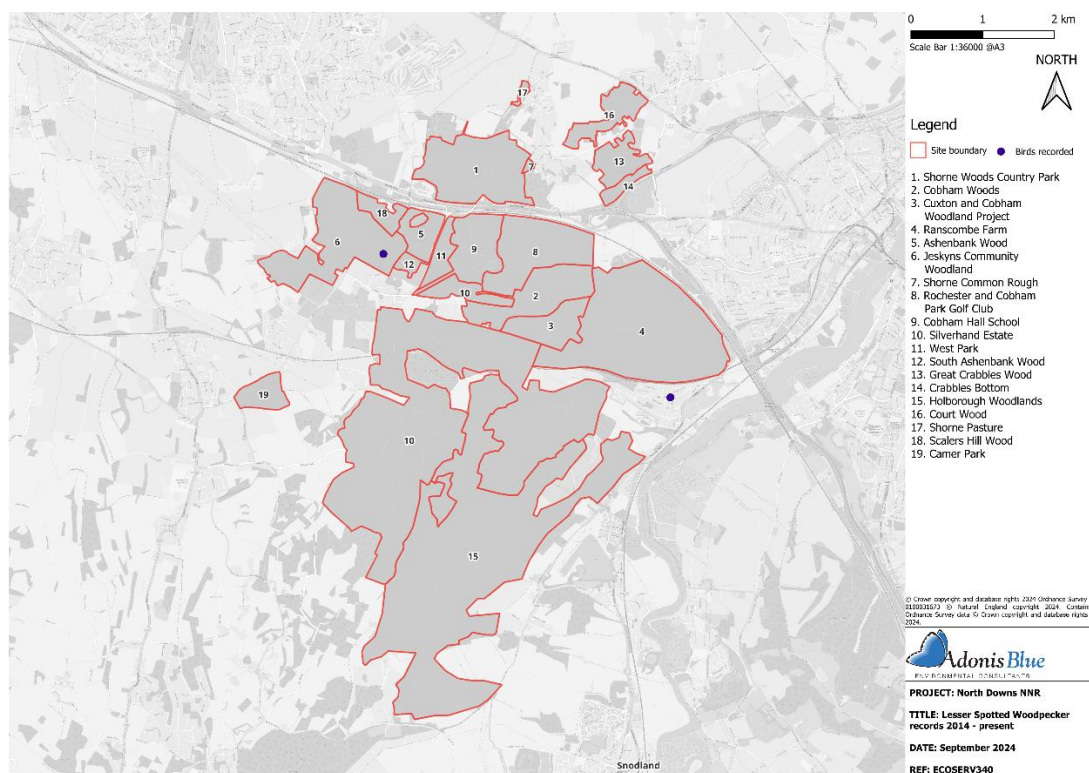


Fig. 2. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker: locations with records, KOS, 1999-2023.

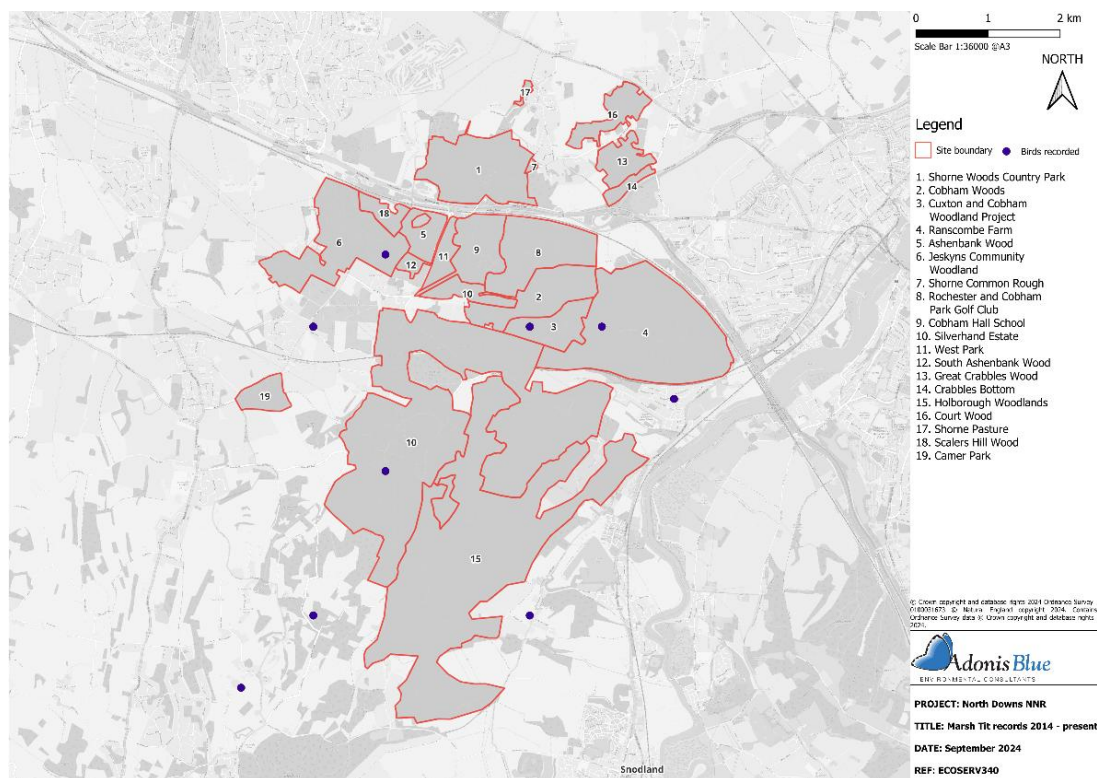


Fig. 3. Marsh Tit: locations with records, KOS, 1999-2023.

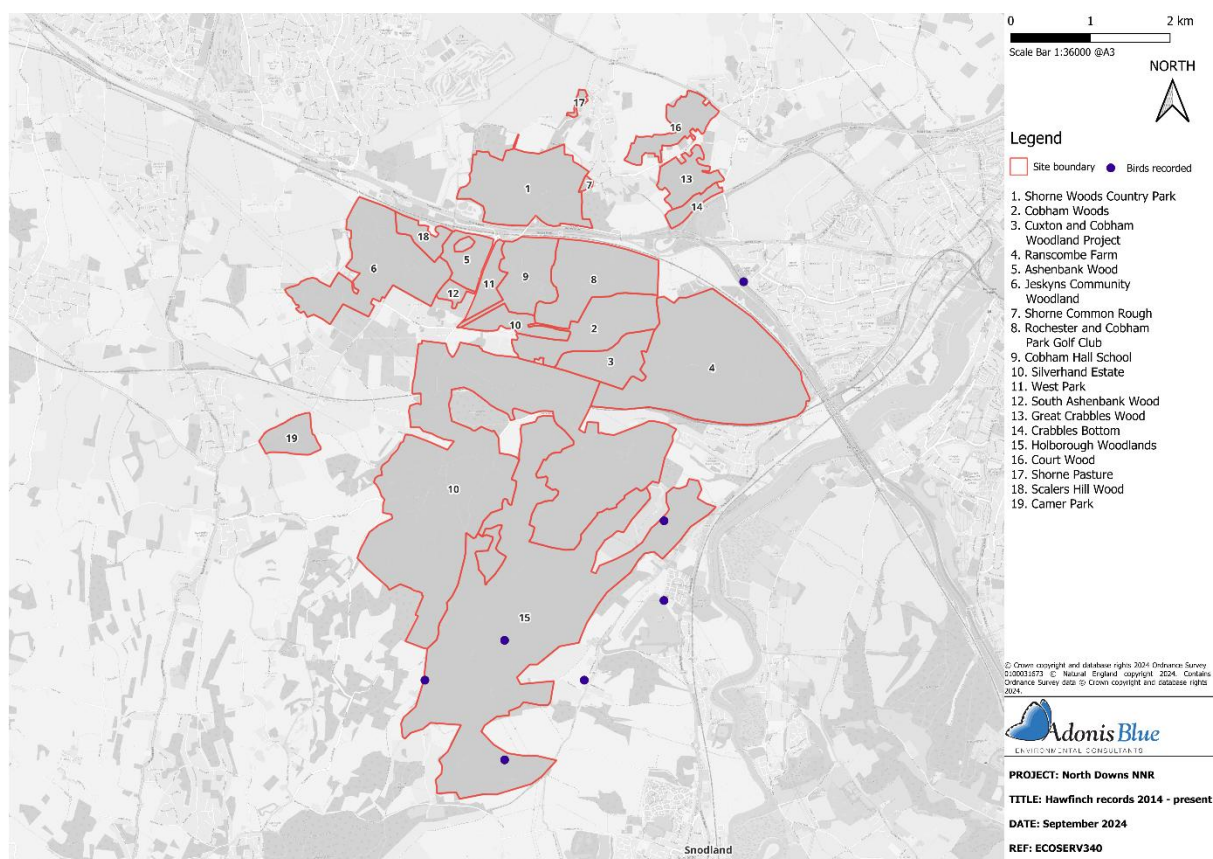


Fig. 4. Hawfinch: locations with records, KOS, 1999-2023.

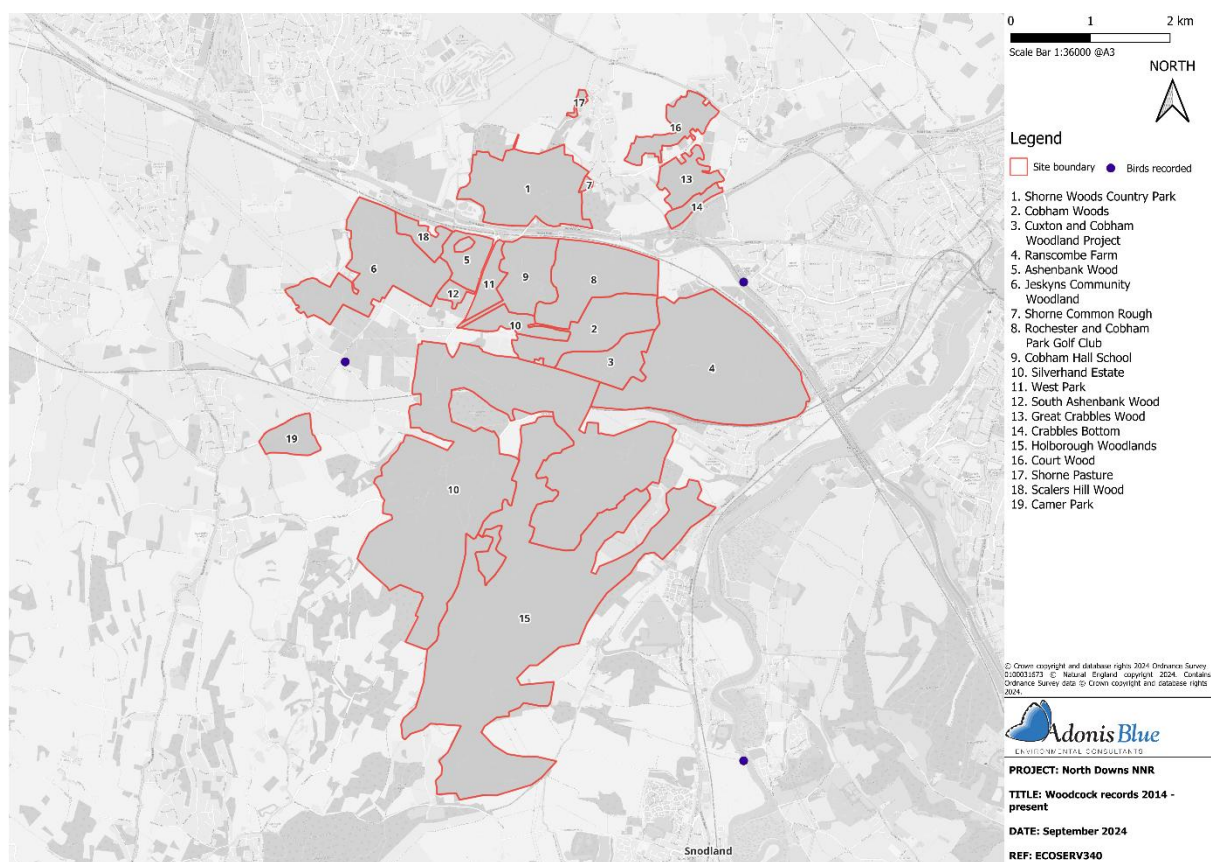


Fig. 5. Woodcock: locations with records, KOS, 1999-2023.

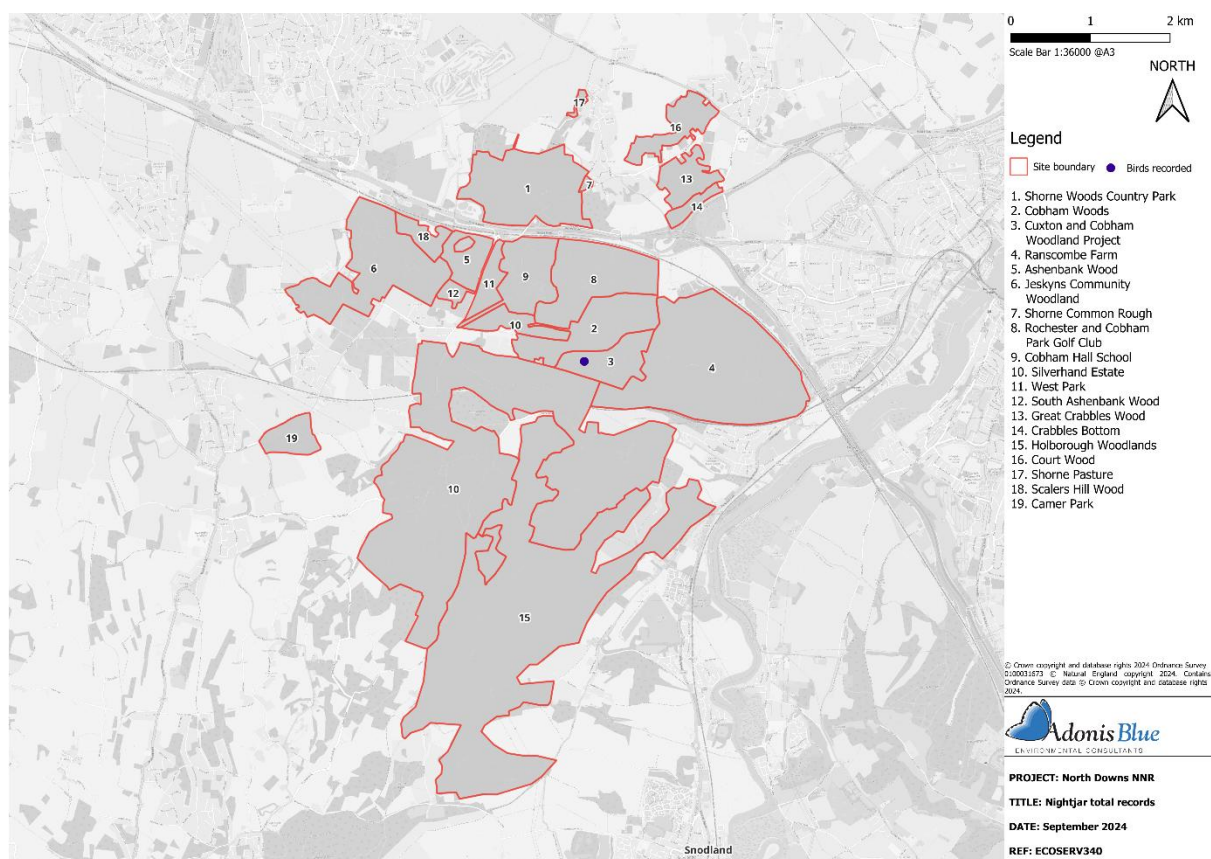


Fig. 6. Nightjar: locations with records, KOS, 1999-2023.

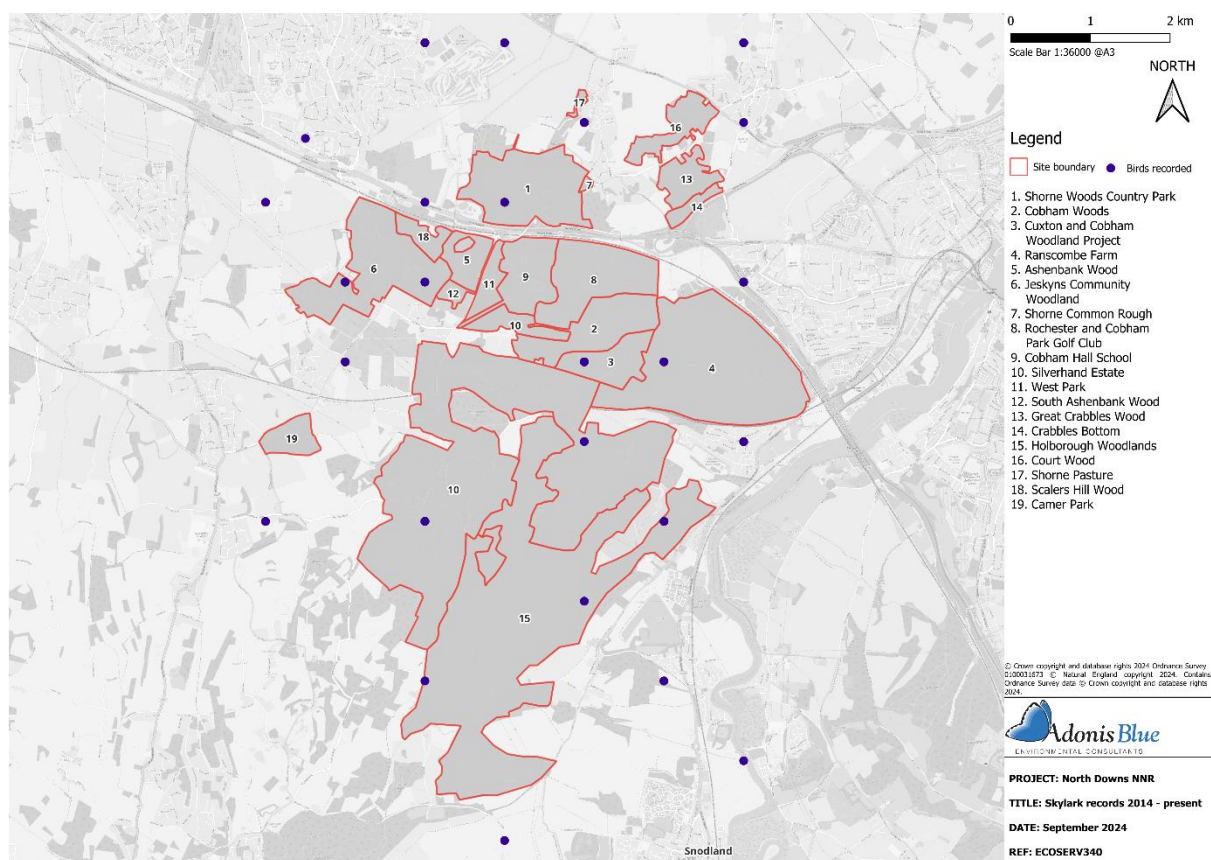


Fig. 7. Skylark: locations with records, KOS, 1999-2023.

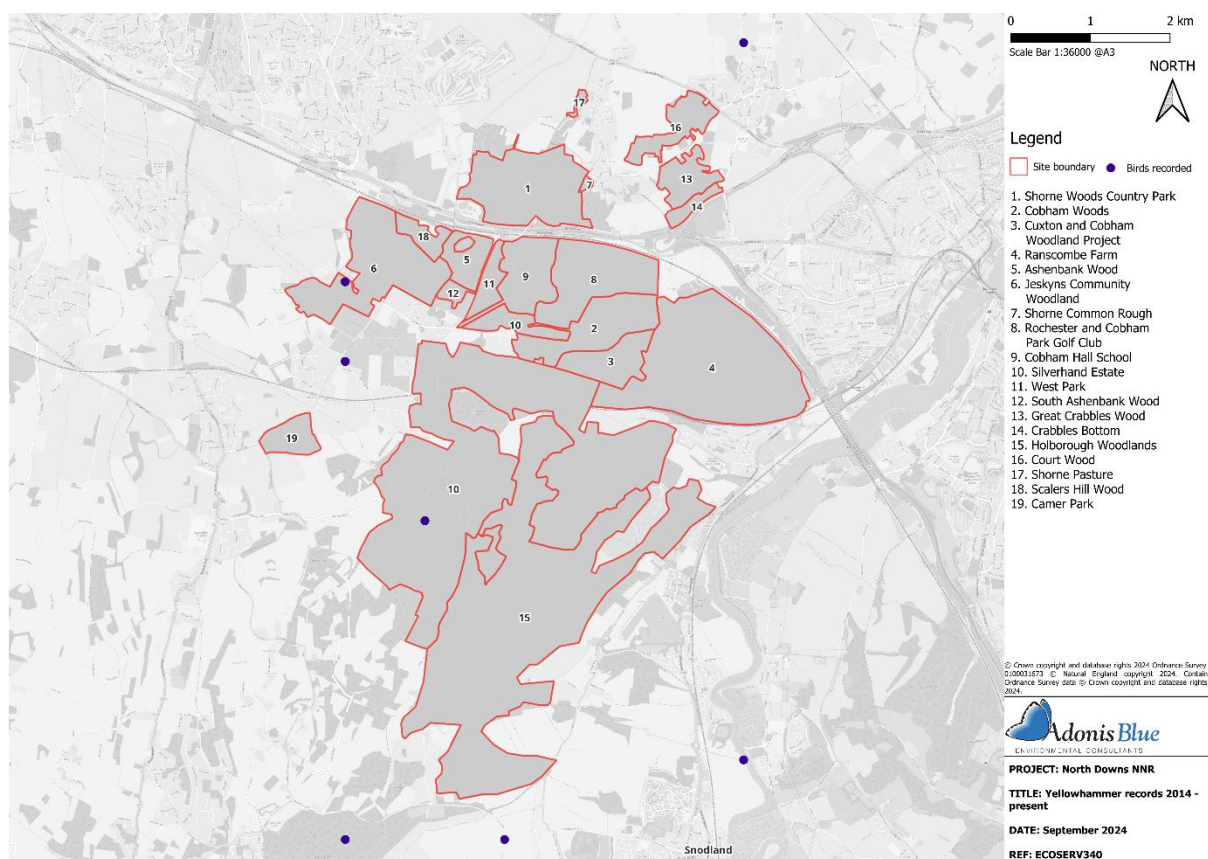


Fig. 8. Yellowhammer: locations with records, KOS, 1999-2023.

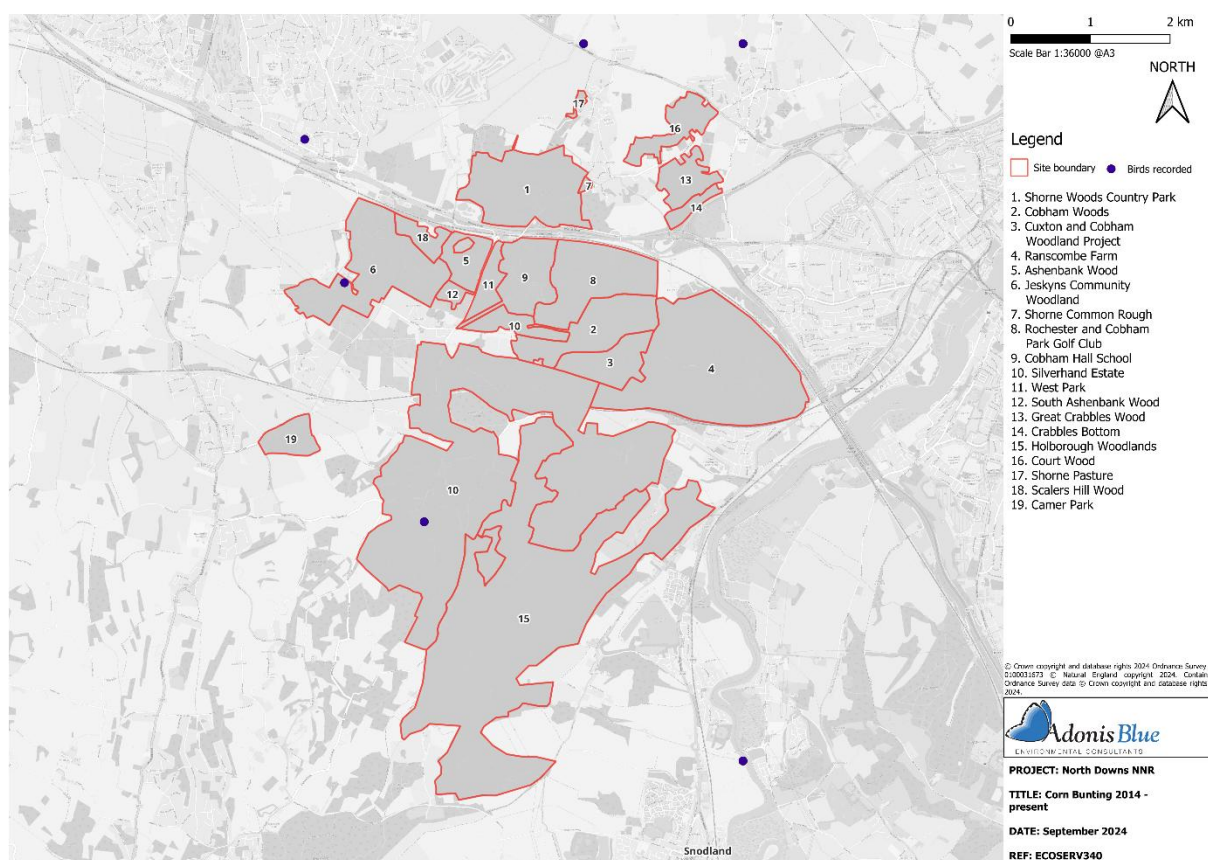


Fig. 9. Corn Bunting: locations with records, KOS, 1999-2023.

3.2 Key sites

The table below summarises sites within the candidate NNR area. We provide an indication of key (red-listed) species associated with each site – based on available data supplemented by expert judgement.

Highest priority species are in bold. Species which should be regarded as priorities for surveys, to ascertain status, are bracketed; see Table 3 for further details.

BTO species codes are listed at the foot of the table.

Table 2. Summary of sites within proposed NNR area with associated priority bird species

Site	Site name	Key species
1	Shorne Woods Country Park	CK, MT, (LS) , SF, M. LI, GR
2	Cobham Woods	CK, MT, (LS) , M. SF,
3	The Leisure Plots	CK, (LE) , LI, GR, Y.
4	Ranscombe Farm	CK, (NJ), MT , LS, S. SF, LI, GR, Y.
5	Ashenbank Wood	MT, (LS) , M. SF, (HF)
6	West Park	Y.
7	Camer Park	M. SF, LI, Y.
8	Silverhand Estate	CK, S. LI, GR, Y. CB
9	Crabble Bottom	LI, GR
10	Shorne Common Rough	CB (farmland to the north), LI, GR
11	Holborough Woodlands	CK, (LE), (WK), (NJ), (LS), MT , SF, M. (N.) , LI, GR, (HF)
12	Jeskyns Community Woodland	CK, LS (no mature woodland), LI, GR, Y. CB
13	Great Crabbles Wood	MT , SF, M.
14	South Ashenbank Wood	MT
15	Cobham Hall School	MT, (LS) , SF, M. GR, Y.

CK = Cuckoo, CB = Corn Bunting, CK = Cuckoo, GR = Greenfinch, HF = Hawfinch. LS = Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. LI = Linnet, LE = Long-eared Owl, MT = Marsh Tit, M. = Mistle Thrush, N. = Nightingale, NJ = Nightjar, S. = Skylark, SF = Spotted Flycatcher, WK = Woodcock, Y. = Yellowhammer

4.0 DISCUSSION

In this section we address the Objectives (3) and (4) of the evaluation: survey requirements, habitat recommendations.

4.1 Survey recommendations

A review of existing data shows that woodland sites in the NNR support several woodland birds that are national conservation priorities. The amount of data housed by KOS is limited but sufficient to indicate that, for example, Marsh Tit and Hawfinch are present across the area in small numbers. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Nightjar are also known to have been present as breeding species. A suite of other red and amber-listed species, associated with woodland and farmland habitats, are also present in the area. These can represent a platform on which to develop a program of conservation management comprising surveys, research, and public engagement.

Table 3. Summary of survey recommendations for the NNR area. These surveys will fill data gaps, identify the relative importance of species features, and inform approaches to habitat management.

#	Focus	Period	Summary of methods	Resource requirements	Rationale
1	Breeding Marsh Tit (and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Hawfinch)	Mar-Apr	Use of playback in suitable habitat across NNR area to determine distribution of Marsh Tit across woodland network. Early-spring fieldwork can enable better understanding of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Hawfinch distribution.	Two morning visits needed to all woodland sites in early-spring. Audio equipment for playback surveys. Proposal submitted to Natural England species recovery programme.	To understand presence, distribution and abundance of woodland specialists to help prioritise habitat management.
2	Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Hobby	Feb-Mar, May-Jul	Vantage point surveys of key woodland areas to determine presence of rare birds of prey.	Professional time to undertake vantage point surveys.	Records indicate potential breeding, but this needs to be confirmed.
3	Long-eared Owl (and Nightjar, Woodcock)	Apr-Jun	Dusk visits to suitable habitat. These data can be supplemented by Audiomoth deployment aimed at informing and monitoring of bat assemblage across NNR.	Seasonal deployment of <i>Audiomoths</i> . Proposal submitted to Natural England species recovery programme by bat evaluation team.	Potential breeding by LEO needs to be confirmed. Historical presence of breeding Nightjar and Woodcock
4	Farmland priorities: Yellowhammer, Linnet, Skylark, Corn Bunting	Apr-May	Establish transects to monitor farmland bird assemblage and species of woodland interface.	Organisational resource of potential citizen science project	Engagement with public and local farming community.
5	Wintering (breeding) Hawfinch (and Firecrest)	Dec-Feb (into spring)	Bespoke surveys of woods focused on downland escarpment. Establish Hawfinch ringing project.	Surveys and GPS-tracking to link winter and breeding areas. Proposal submitted to Natural England species recovery programme.	Potential regional collaboration with existing survey effort in Sussex.

4.2 Habitat management

Table 4. Summary of key habitat management recommendations that are likely to be most relevant to the NNR area and key bird species.

#	Habitat management	Summary	Key target bird species
1	Reinstatement of coppicing (and clear-fell)	A suite of birds depends on early successional woodland, including several declining long-distance migrants. Similarly, Nightjar, Tree Pipit and Woodcock use clear-fell areas and could be encouraged to (re)colonise.	Willow Warbler, Garden Warbler, Nightingale, Nightjar, Tree Pipit, Woodcock
2	Promote dense understorey in regenerating woodland	Maintaining understorey across all stages of woodland growth is important to promote a diverse bird assemblage, including dependent species such as Marsh Tit. Deer management or use of exclusion fencing may be required.	Marsh Tit, Bullfinch, Garden Warbler, Nightingale, Dunnock, Long-tailed Tit
3	Retention of dead wood within mature woodland sites	Woodlands with dead wood support diverse invertebrate food supplies and provide more nest sites for cavity-nesting birds. Dead wood is important for a range of rare invertebrate species and also supports cavity-dwelling bats.	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
4	Rewetting of woodland sites	Enhancing dampness of woodland, through soft changes to water courses where feasible such as leaky woody dams, will enhance invertebrate food supplies and improve habitat quality.	Marsh Tit, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Nightingale
5	Landscape scale approach to configuration of mixed woodland growth stages	The network of woodlands across the proposed NNR area is an opportunity to introduce a mosaic of different growth stages across the landscape, benefiting priorities Marsh Tit and Hawfinch. Increased habitat complexity and more edges will enhance species diversity.	Marsh Tit, Hawfinch. Overall species richness.
6	Softening edges between woodland and farmland parcels	Establishment of scrub at interface between woodland and adjacent land provides habitat for a range of species. These ecotones are attractive to conservation priority species, including Kent priority Turtle Dove.	Yellowhammer, Bullfinch, Linnet, Dunnock, Song Thrush, Turtle Dove, Nightingale
7	Improve hedges and field margins in farmed areas	Sympathetic hedge management can benefit a range of species and enhance biodiversity value across area. Improved field margins enhance small mammal food resource for Barn Owl and Kestrel.	Yellowhammer, Linnet, Dunnock, Bullfinch, Whitethroat, Barn Owl, Kestrel

5.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

GIS mapping was undertaken by Ben Birch.

6.0 REFERENCES

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Stanbury, A. *et al.* (2021). The status of our bird populations: the fifth Birds of Conservation Concern in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man and second IUCN Red List assessment of extinction risk for Great Britain. *British Birds* 114: 723-747.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – SPECIES LIST FROM KOS DATASET, 2014-2023

Little Grebe	Kestrel	Turtle Dove	Whitethroat
Great Crested Grebe	Merlin	Ring-necked Parakeet	Garden Warbler
Black-necked Grebe	Hobby	Cuckoo	Blackcap
Fulmar	Peregrine	Barn Owl	Yellow-browed Warbler
Gannet	Red-legged Partridge	Little Owl	Chiffchaff
Cormorant	Pheasant	Tawny Owl	Willow Warbler
Cattle Egret	Water Rail	Long-eared Owl	Goldcrest
Little Egret	Moorhen	Short-eared Owl	Firecrest
Great White Egret	Coot	Nightjar	Spotted Flycatcher
Grey Heron	Oystercatcher	Swift	Pied Flycatcher
White Stork	Black-winged Stilt	Kingfisher	Bearded Tit
Glossy Ibis	Avocet	Green Woodpecker	Long-tailed Tit
Mute Swan	Little Ringed Plover	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Marsh Tit
Bewick's Swan	Ringed Plover	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Coal Tit
Whooper Swan	Golden Plover	Woodlark	Blue Tit
White-fronted Goose	Grey Plover	Skylark	Great Tit
Greylag Goose	Lapwing	Sand Martin	Nuthatch
Canada Goose	Knot	Swallow	Treecreeper
Barnacle Goose	Dunlin	House Martin	Jay
Brent Goose	Ruff	Meadow Pipit	Magpie
Pale Bellied Brent Goose	Jack Snipe	Rock Pipit	Jackdaw
Egyptian Goose	Snipe	Water Pipit	Rook
Ruddy Shelduck	Woodcock	Yellow Wagtail	Carrion Crow
Shelduck	Black-tailed Godwit	Grey Wagtail	Hooded Crow
Mandarin Duck	Bar-tailed Godwit	Pied Wagtail	Raven
Wigeon	Whimbrel	White Wagtail	Starling
Gadwall	Curlew	Waxwing	House Sparrow
Teal	Redshank	Wren	Tree Sparrow
Mallard	Greenshank	Dunnock	Chaffinch
Pintail	Green Sandpiper	Robin	Brambling
Garganey	Common Sandpiper	Nightingale	Greenfinch
Shoveler	Mediterranean Gull	Black Redstart	Goldfinch
Pochard	Little Gull	Whinchat	Siskin
Tufted Duck	Black-headed Gull	Stonechat	Linnet
Scaup	Common Gull	Wheatear	Lesser Redpoll
Common Scoter	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Ring Ouzel	Common (Mealy) Redpoll
Smew	Herring Gull	Blackbird	Redpoll species
Goosander	Yellow-legged Gull	Fieldfare	Bullfinch
Honey Buzzard	Great Black-backed Gull	Song Thrush	Hawfinch
Red Kite	Sandwich Tern	Redwing	Yellowhammer
Marsh Harrier	Common Tern	Mistle Thrush	Reed Bunting
Hen Harrier	Feral Pigeon	Cetti's Warbler	Corn Bunting
Sparrowhawk	Stock Dove	Sedge Warbler	Black Swan
Common Buzzard	Wood Pigeon	Reed Warbler	
Osprey	Collared Dove	Lesser Whitethroat	