

My patch – Thetford

I've been fortunate to have had excellent local patches for the past two decades: the green spaces of Shanghai, then Abu Dhabi, and, since 2009, the Nunnery Lakes and surroundings on the south side of Thetford. The last attracts rather fewer shrikes and rock thrushes than the others – so far! – but the birds and other taxa provide ample interest to keep me motivated on a near-daily basis, and to learn more about it every time I visit.

Thetford lies within Breckland, on the Norfolk/Suffolk border, an area characterised by a diverse mix of habitats including heathland, conifer plantations and arable farming, and spread across a gently undulating plateau covered largely with sandy soils. Breckland is designated as a Special Protection Area – and well known to birders – for supporting populations of European importance of European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* (up to 12.2% of the GB breeding population), Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicanus* (up to 74.7%) and Woodlark *Lullula arborea* (up to 28.7%). My patch encompasses the former gravel workings, riverside fen and drier grassland habitats of the BTO Nunnery Lakes reserve (a County Wildlife Site), the typical Breckland heaths of Barnhamcross Common and Thetford Heath (both SSSIs), my house and garden, and the BTO headquarters,

where I work. All of it is easily accessible on foot from home, although my bike has occasionally been employed for a 'bird emergency'! The surrounding land use is diverse, including residential housing to the north, a large estate with a sizeable gamebird shoot to the east and open-access land to the west, each bringing a blend of opportunities and challenges for birds and other wildlife.

BirdTrack www.birdtrack.net shows that I have just over 100,000 bird records from my patch, the vast majority in more than 2,200 complete lists (visits where I logged all species positively identified by sight or sound, not just the highlights). An oft-mentioned benefit of covering a local patch regularly is the potential to find birds of site-level, local or even national rarity. Such discoveries are certainly rewarding, and for me they include the excitement of stumbling across Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*, Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*, Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus* and two Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*, and dashing out of an interview – in which I'd given a presentation about identifying *Acrocephalus* warblers by song – to twitch a singing Great Reed Warbler *A. arundinaceus* a colleague had found less than 700 m away!

However, I think the tendency of some birders and recording groups to emphasise the rare and unusual can detract from the



Justin Walker

136. The habitat mosaic of southern Thetford, including the Nunnery Lakes, January 2018.

My patch

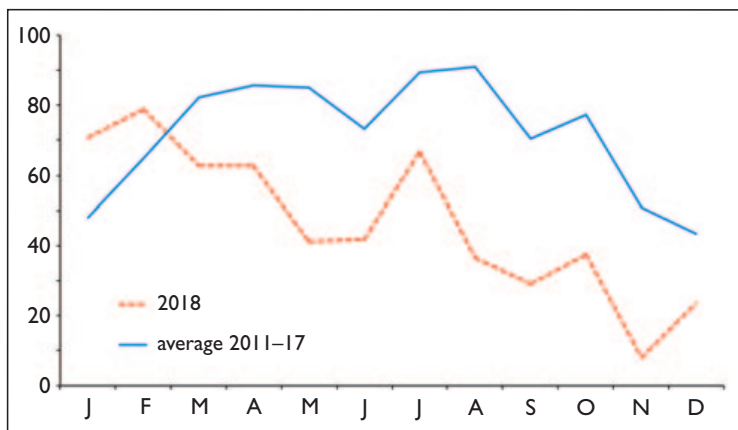


Fig. 1. The percentage of visits to the Nunnery Lakes during which I recorded Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*.

value of the 'ordinary'. For me, the beauty of having an extensive BirdTrack dataset for my patch is what it reveals about patterns of occurrence/detectability of common birds. Many such species would be easy to overlook if applying a subjective approach to recording, logging only the perceived 'notables' on each visit. Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* is a good example: a species I encountered on more than two in three visits during my early years on the patch but that has plummeted to just one in five visits since the end of summer 2018. Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* is another: recorded on just 3% of my visits to the Nunnery Lakes from July 2009 to the end of 2012 ($n = 373$) but, following their colonisation of the warehouse roofs of Thetford, featuring on two-thirds of my lists since the start of 2018 ($n = 233$).

It took only a few years of consistently collected data for weekly changes in species diversity to become apparent, too. April – specifically the last ten days – is the best time for a big day list, and I've recorded 71% of all the birds I've registered on patch during April. In contrast, many a coastal patch-watcher's favourite month, October, is typically quiet in deepest Breckland (57% by the same measure): most of the summer visitors have gone and many autumn arrivals are yet to filter the 60–70 km inland.

Whenever time allows, I count individuals, including as many common species as possible. This tells me that while Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* numbers peak during the first week of October (max. site count 27), the second week of November is the week for Blackbirds *T. merula* (peak

count 94) and that while Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus* are most numerous – or at least most detectable – in the third week of April (peak count 16), it's all about the last week of August for Chiffchaffs *P. collybita* (peak count 43).

The discipline of doing complete lists for most of my patch visits keeps me focused during the quieter times and has yielded some rarities, too. In February 2019, I extended an afternoon walk to a place

where a wintering Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* can often be found along a line of pylons. As I approached the spot, a flock of Yellowhammers *Emberiza citrinella* flew up into a nearby oak. The urge to count them for my complete list kicked in, and the sequence went something like: Yellowhammer 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... wait: that next one is a Little Bunting *E. pusilla*!

Patches are about a personal connection not only with a place and its birds, but also with the people who share it. Unsurprisingly, BTO's only reserve is monitored regularly by a small but dedicated band of birders, ringers and nest recorders from among the organisation's staff, past and present. Several local residents and anglers are also interested in the site's birdlife. Sharing and comparing discoveries with other frequent visitors certainly adds to the experience. For me, this is further enhanced by feeling part of a much larger community of patch-focused birders via BirdTrack, and through various light-hearted competitions over the years, including Patchwork Challenge and the Twenty Eleven All-taxa Listing (TEAL) Cup. The TEAL Cup involved BTO and RSPB staff scouring the reserves around their respective headquarters throughout 2011; whilst BTO fell a few (hundred) beetles short on the all-taxa element, The Nunnery did pip The Lodge on birds! The overriding memory of that year was how people from across the organisation got involved, and how it highlighted the diversity of birds and other wildlife on our doorstep – the very essence of watching a local patch.

Nick Moran