

BIRDS

Birds on the Estate include barn owls, long-eared owls and hobbies. The Estate also supports good numbers of farmland birds whose populations have declined dramatically in the UK, such as grey partridge, skylark and corn bunting.

Residential Breeding Birds

The Estate has a wide diversity of carefully managed habitats. There is virtually no water, which precludes many species. However, with miles of woodland edge and thick hedgerows interspersed with arable and downland, Cholderton supports large numbers of breeding birds of many species.

Barn Owl Almost 30 owl boxes have been put up in barns across the Cholderton Estate. As a result, numbers of barn owls have built up from a single breeding pair to about seven. Rat poison is not used around the buildings, to ensure that the owls do not eat poisoned rats. Rat poisons have a cumulative effect, and the barn owl is top of the food chain and very vulnerable. Few things compare with the magic of watching a snow-white barn owl as it glides and stoops.

Blackbird Abundant throughout the Estate, and best loved as a brilliant songster.

Blackcap Common all over the Estate, breeding in every suitable locality.

Bullfinch Widely distributed over the more thickly hedged and wooded areas, bullfinches have increased in numbers in recent years. The scarlet-breasted male is a glorious addition of colour to hedgerows in late winter.

Buzzard All the large woods have resident pairs. Buzzards are not a recent arrival, as birds were certainly breeding here in the 1950s and probably before.

Carrion Crow Not encouraged, as it is a predator of lapwing chicks and other ground-nesting birds. Crows also kill newly born lambs, pecking through the eye and then removing the liver.

Chaffinch Present and common in all wooded areas on the Estate.

Chiffchaff Present and common in all wooded areas on the Estate.

Collared Dove Common around farm buildings all over the Estate.

Corn Bunting Most years will see an overwintering flock of between 20 and 80 birds at Cholderton. Only a few pairs stay to breed, and efforts are being made to ensure that areas of rough grass are left and protected in Stewardship fields in an effort to provide suitable breeding sites. Corn buntings do not favour dense hedges, preferring areas of scattered scrub.

Cuckoo Until recently this was a common bird at Cholderton, but numbers have fallen in the last two years, apparently owing to conditions on their wintering grounds in Africa.

Dunnock Common in many of the hedgerows on lower ground.

Goldfinch This jewel-like species has increased tremendously in the past few years, no doubt encouraged by the policy of allowing dandelions to seed in the grass fields and not being overzealous in the control of thistles and burdock.

Garden Warbler Breeds in several of the woods and also in scrubby areas.

Goldcrest Common in most of the lowland woods, breeding in evergreen trees, particularly yew.

Grasshopper Warbler Adults are seen every years in crops of winter oats while they are being combined. Some of these may be migrant birds, but some do breed here, if not every year.

Great Spotted Woodpecker A common breeding bird at Cholderton, present in all of the woodlands.

Greenfinch Very common in some areas on the Estate, often associated with yew trees.

Green Woodpecker Now present in all the larger woods and a common sight in gardens on the Estate, the green woodpecker has responded to the Estate's policy of maintaining a balance of old and young trees in the woods. Removing all older trees in a clear cut would effectively make it impossible for the woodpecker to breed.

Grey Partridge It is always exciting to see a pair of grey partridges, with their plumage of ochre and grey and apparent mutual devotion. This species has suffered a nationwide decline of disastrous proportions due to changes in farming practice and competition from other game birds. Hen pheasants are notorious for laying in grey partridge nests, eventually causing the grey partridge hen to abandon her nest.



At Cholderton, many years' work had been dedicated to attempting to arrest the decline of this beautiful bird. Measures include legal vermin control, maintaining a mixed farming system, protecting hedgerows from animal grazing, turning to a fully organic system, organising reserve areas all over the Estate where rough grass is left to provide shelter and nesting cover, and not releasing hen pheasants.

Grey Wagtail Grey wagtails breed at the Home Farm Dairy and near the Victorian walled garden.

Hobby It is difficult to prove that hobbies are breeding in any given area, as their nests are usually hard to find. However, hobbies are seen at Cholderton every year, normally hunting swallows and martins around the farm buildings. It is likely that one of the outlying woods has a nesting site.

For sheer prowess in aerial acrobatics and supreme elegance, this bird has no rival. Its crescent wings and flickering flight in high-altitude pursuit of swallows and martins make it one of the most memorable of birds. Occasional low-level hunting forays are executed with great rapidity and with lethal effect. The hobby's ability to take dragonflies and dung beetles on the wing and then pause in mid-air to nip off their wings before eating them is remarkable.

House Martin This species suffered a disaster on migration or on the wintering grounds four or five years ago, but numbers have gradually recovered since. Huge flocks of martins congregate over the Home Farm in the autumn.

House Sparrow House sparrows were once a very common bird in arable fields and adjoining hedges, flying in large flocks to take grain from ripening crops. Fortunately, a population persisted around one of the dairies at Cholderton, feeding on waste corn from the feeding of the dairy cows. This has been so successful that house sparrows are re-colonising areas and there is once again a thriving population at Home Farm.

Jackdaw Common on the Estate and nesting in many of the older farm buildings.

Jay These birds are found in all the Estate's larger woods. The harsh alarm call alerts one to unwelcome visitors; it is known as the Forester's Friend because of its planting of acorns.

Kestrel There are many pairs of this colourful raptor, breeding in dead trees, old buildings, owl boxes and even hay barns all over the Estate. Their abundance is an indication of a thriving population of voles and large beetles, which form their principal prey.

Lapwing This species has suffered from a disastrous decline in recent years. They were common in the 1960s but almost lost by the late 1980s, when Cholderton had only three breeding pairs left.

At that time there was a far greater emphasis on growing cereals than there is now. The decision was taken to step up the stock enterprises and reduce the acreage devoted to cereals. Mixed farming – with its emphasis on using grass/leguminous mixtures for grazing and forage conservation, together with brassica crops such as kale and turnip for winter feed, and spring barley as the predominant cereal – was the only way in which structure and biodiversity could be generated in a landscape that was otherwise palpably unsuitable for the lapwing. The plan is working: in 2002 Cholderton had around 20 breeding pairs, with several fields having up to four pairs. Foxes remain a principle danger, scooping up fledgling birds whenever they have the opportunity.

Lapwings tend to start laying towards the end of March, but this first brood is often unsuccessful owing to predators and the vagaries of the weather. The important thing is to ensure that bare ground is available in late April/May so the birds have a chance to produce a second and generally more productive brood.

Lesser Whitethroat Favouring the thickest parts of the hedge, particularly clumps of blackthorn, lesser whitethroats are found all over the Estate. They are secretive and very difficult to see, but have a distinctive song.

Little Grebe It was a surprise when a pair of these appeared at the restored Victorian lake in the grounds of Cholderton Park. Breeding has been attempted for three consecutive years.

Little Owl There are a couple of pairs of this engaging bird on the Estate. Numbers have fallen, probably owing to a lack of suitable nesting sites after many old trees were lost in the two great wind storms. More nesting boxes will be provided.

Linnet Linnets have increased substantially in recent years, and are now very widespread, being found in most fields and hedgerows. Seeding dandelions and cruciferous plants are very attractive to them.

Long-eared Owl Two or three pairs nest in woodlands on the fringes of the Estate.

Magpie Not encouraged, as it is a rapacious predator of other birds' nests and their young. Grey partridge are particularly susceptible.

Mallard Pairs breed on the River Bourne and even in the woods half a mile away. The river – which most years flows only in the winter – has often dried before the ducklings can get to it. There are surprise successes, with ducks rearing broods on puddles created by a leaking trough, for example. Others rear their young on the lake in the park.

Meadow Pipit This bird has benefited from the Stewardship Scheme. It was formerly rare at Cholderton, but now breeds in quite large numbers on rough grassland. Wintering birds are often seen in fields where livestock are being fed.

Mistle Thrush This is Cholderton's most common thrush, widespread and easily seen. Later summer flocks in excess of 250 have been seen. It is an early breeder, favouring yew trees to nest in.

Moorhen A relatively new arrival as a breeding bird, moorhens first nested at the Home Farm Dairy in the late 1970s and have done so ever since.

Nightingale An occasional breeder at Cholderton, in Scotland Wood and possibly in other localities as well. An incomparable songster that makes time stand still – if only for a minute!

Nuthatch Common in all larger woodlands on the Estate.

Pied Wagtail This is common and breeds in several places on the Estate.

Pheasant Pheasants are mostly reared and released for shooting. However, some birds are wild and can be successful breeders. The new birds are released in pens in the woods, where they are protected until the shooting season. Pheasant shooting has had a considerable impact on the Cholderton landscape, and many woods have been planted to provide cover for them. There has been a beneficial effect on the general biodiversity of the area.

Quail This is a summer visitor, breeding at Cholderton most years. It is very difficult to see, but the call, repeated persistently, is often heard. The growing or organic crops, which will encourage arable weeds, should benefit this species.

Raven Ravens are now breeding on the Estate, and adults have been present for ten years. At Cholderton it is a bird of the first light and the late evening, particularly during the winter.

Red-legged Partridge A very common game bird, normally reared and released for shooting. Unfortunately, the original wild strain of these birds has disappeared. They were not so highly coloured as the modern type and were smaller and far more successful breeders in the wild. Though not indigenous to the UK, the first introduced stock has adapted to our conditions.

Red Kite Two birds fledged in July 2009. Our first record of breeding of this spectacular bird.

Red Start Breeding in some years, redstarts are seen in the old orchard, or in hedgerows.

Robin A common bird of hedge and woodland, whose numbers appear to be increasing at Cholderton.

Rook Several rookeries are present on the Estate, and a new one was started at the Home Farm in 2002.

Skylark Skylarks are widespread over the whole Estate, breeding in spring barley crops. The singing of the skylark as it ascends higher and higher has to be one of the glories of spring.

Song Thrush Present in all the low ground woodland and breeding in many hedgerows, song thrushes are no doubt encouraged by the large numbers of snails and the fact that slug pellets are never used at Cholderton.

Sparrowhawk A very common and fearless raptor on the Estate, exacting a toll of wood pigeons in particular. It kills woodcock and woodpeckers as well as many smaller species of bird. There are several breeding pairs at Cholderton.

Spotted Flycatcher Pairs of spotted flycatcher breed at Quarley Farm, Cholderton Park, Thruxton Farm and Home Farm. Numbers have declined, but organic farming may assist them. In the late 1960s they were present in large numbers, nesting in hedgerows, and every field had several families that could be seen on prominent perches.

Starling Small wintering flocks and pairs breed in suitable localities all over the Estate.

Stock Dove There are many breeding pairs of this attractive, very fast-flying dove at Cholderton. In winter they forage over fields where animals are being fed and in the spring they feed on weeds germinating in the cereal crops. Occasionally they form large flocks and will perform an aerial display en masse, with up to 300 birds whirling vertically and then diving with a rush of wings that sounds like the roar of a strong wind in a forest.

Stonechat Breeding annually in areas of rough grass at Cholderton, the stonechat has very similar requirements to the whinchat.

Swallow There are large numbers of swallows nesting in farm buildings and in garages and other suitable locations all over the area. In the autumn hundreds gather in flocks over the Home Farm. They find an abundance of insect life here owing to the presence of stock and manure. Organic farming should provide a further boost. Spring 2002 saw a record return of swallows.

Swift These nest in the roof on one cottage only on the Estate, but large numbers feed over the fields in the summer. Swift boxes will be erected under the eaves of suitable properties to try to encourage them to breed.

Tawny Owl Tawny owls are common and are found in all the principal woods on the Estate.

Tits: marsh, blue, coal, great, long-tailed All these species breed in wooded areas of the Estate. The old orchard is a particularly popular nesting area as the old apple trees have many suitable holes, but even old rotten fencing posts can be utilised. They long-tailed tit's round nest – immensely complex and almost invisible – is a near miracle of nest-building craft; the inside is interwoven with animal hairs and the outside with lichen. A most remarkable sight in winter are family parties patiently working the hedgerows and woodlands with the older birds leading and the younger following.

Treecreeper Treecreepers are distributed through all the larger woodlands on the Estate.

Tree Pipit A couple of pairs normally breed in an area holding two new plantations on the edge of the downs. The bird has a delightful song and display flight; it ascends, higher than a meadow pipit, then falls on stiff wings.

Tufted Duck These have attempted to breed on the lake on two occasions, but have not as yet been successful.

Turtle Dove With a back of tortoiseshell and a pink breast, this is a particularly beautiful bird, sadly depleted in numbers. Several pairs return to breed at Cholderton every year. Fumitory - a common arable weed – is a particular favourite of this dove, and now that cereal fields are no longer being sprayed, there may be an increase in numbers at Cholderton.

Wheatear This is a common migrant of the spring and autumn, but breeding has recently occurred on the Estate.

Whinchat Areas of rough grass with upstanding dead stalks of wild parsnip are favoured by this species, which breeds at Cholderton most years.

Whitethroat Whitethroats breed in most of the hedgerows on the Estate. As part of the wildlife management, hawthorn is left to form trees above the hedge to provide singing perches for these birds.

Willow Warbler Although not as widespread as some of the other warblers on the Estate, willow warblers breed regularly around the waterworks.

Wood Pigeon Wood pigeons are common and may cause damage to crops, but are normally easily deterred by flying streamers in fields that might be subject to attack. Numbers are swelled in the winter by flocks of migrant birds. Clover provides a valuable food source for much of the winter.

The cooing of the wood pigeons on a balmy, wet June morning is one of the most enjoyable sounds of the southern countryside.

Wren Abundant throughout the Estate.

Yellowhammer Wintering flocks of yellowhammers can exceed 200 birds, occupying every hedgerow on the Estate. Waste corn is placed along hedgerows over the winter to help them through.