

Nature Notes 17 Scrub: a valuable habitat for wildlife.

Scrub habitats, dominated by woody plants less than 5m, are transitory phases of successional changes leading to full closed canopy woodlands. Typically scrub has a higher biodiversity than mature woodland because it is comprised of a mosaic of bushes and ground layer plants, providing both food and nesting sites for a wide range of birds, many of which are declining nationally.

As summer migrants head south, new waves of incomers arrive from northern Europe, including redwings, fieldfares and migrant blackbirds (and we hope they will continue to do so even if immigration controls are tightened).



Fieldfare feeding on berries (U-tube)

After flying non-stop for hundreds of miles, these visitors need to replenish their energy by feeding on berries such as hips, haws, sloes, holly and snow berries. Different species of birds not only specialise on different species of plants but also by feeding on different parts of the same plant. The smaller, lighter redwings and song thrushes perch on the thinner outer twigs while the heavier blackbirds and fieldfares perch more on thicker branches nearer the middle of the bushes. Here the berries are less accessible but the birds feeding on them are safer. Perching on the outer twigs, where the berries are easier to reach, has a cost: a greater risk of the feeding birds being eaten themselves, particularly by sparrow hawks which patrol these bushes at this time of year.



Sparrow hawk captures a blackbird (nature.org.uk)

In summer a different range of birds nest in scrub including the tiny willow warbler, once one of the commonest species on our commons but now very rarely seen or heard. Whitethroats, lesser whitethroats, bull finches, green finches and willow tits have also declined.

The purring song of the nationally declining turtle doves, can still be heard on Alderford Common but they desperately need more favourable feeding sites of short swards within close reach of their nests, if they are not to follow the nightingale in no longer breeding in our parish.



Bullfinch feeding its young (hbw.com)



Turtle dove (sdakotabird.com)

The decline of the nightingale on both Uppgate and Alderford Common does not necessarily have to be irreversible. Nightingales still breed within about three miles of the Parish and have been heard singing on both commons early in spring, as they attempt to set up territories but they fail because the structure of scrub on the commons is no longer suitable for them to use for breeding. To maintain its favourability for nightingales and other breeding birds, scrub needs to be very carefully managed. Natural England have published a comprehensive handbook on scrub management explaining how to create a mosaic of different heights of scrub by rotational coppicing and layering.

Ironically much of the time conservation volunteers spend on the commons is spent reducing scrub. This is because woody plants tend to invade the more open plant communities of key conservation value. One answer to this apparent dilemma is to have appropriate grazing regimes, using four legged lawnmowers, to eat down the invading young scrub plants as traditionally happened for many centuries until after WWII. Potentially appropriate grazing could release more volunteer time for managing mature scrub. Not all grazers are equally suitable. Goats, which used to be frequently kept on the commons, even during the time I have lived here, are the most effective browsers but sheep and cattle also eat woody tissues because they can digest them in their four chambered stomachs. Ponies with their straight through digestive canals, find tough fibrous tissues less digestible, so tend to avoid eating them.

As is often the case, there is a tricky balance to be struck to maximise the biodiversity of both plants and animals.

Mark (November 2018)