

Birds in history - The Wheatear



The Wheatear is a starling - sized bird that is common in this area. I have seen several recently on a walk up Holcombe Hill. They are inquisitive birds and will often sit up on a wall or fence and watch you. But why are they called Wheatears?

No - it's nothing to do with their ears. The name comes from the “Olde English” for their appearance when they fly away from you.



Can you see it? White Arse – if you will pardon my French.

In C16 France this bird was called Cul-blanc and in Dutch it is called Wittstaart, so we all think along the same lines.

Snipe, sniper and sniping - A historical yarn



By the late 18th century the word ‘sniper’ was being used in letters sent home by English officers serving in India, some of whom took to referring to a day’s rough shooting as ‘going out sniping’.

The snipe is a small, fast-flying game bird with mottled black and brown plumage and a particularly erratic, twisting flight that make it difficult to see and even more difficult to hit.

It took a skilled sportsman with a flintlock gun to bring down a snipe in flight. Such an accomplished shot was regarded as above average, and hence the term “Sniper” was adopted by the military.

Birds in history - The Nightjar or Goatsucker or Whip-poor-will



These birds have tiny beaks that open to reveal an impressively large mouth used to catch flying insects, and they are active mainly at night. Their nocturnal habits and calls made them mysterious, and their bizarre appearance required an explanation, and as early as the 300s BC Aristotle wrote about the trouble these birds could cause with goats. Four hundred years later not much had changed, and in 77 AD Pliny passed along the prevailing wisdom:



“When I was in Switzerland I saw an aged man, who fed his goats upon the mountain, which I had gone up in search for plants: I asked him whether he knew of a bird the size of a Blackbird, blind in the day-time, keen of sight at night, which in the dark is wont to suck goats udders, so that afterwards the animals go blind. Now he replied... that he had suffered many losses from those very birds; so that he had once had six she-goats blinded.... But possibly that aged man was jesting with me.”



Coaly Bird = Blackbird



Redbreast = Robin



Titmouse = Blue Tit



Peewit = Lapwing or
Green Plover



Spadger = House Sparrow



Dab Chick = Little Grebe



Ring Dove = Woodpigeon



Throstle = Song Thrush

Below is a section of my scan of the Bury Natural History Society records for 1868 - 1871 edited by Richard Davenport:

Falco fEsalon : Merlin. Not very common, being much hunted for by collectors. A beautiful specimen was obtained by Mr. John Drake (a member of our Society), at Olegg Hall, near Rochdale ; others have been taken about Prestwich, Middleton, and Rawtenstall every year.

F. tinnunculus : Kestrel. Common everywhere ; breeding at Simpson Clough, and The Park, Pilkington.

F. nisus : Sparrow Hawk. Not so common as *F. tinnunculus* ; nests have been found at The Park, in the year 1870.

Otus vulgaris : Long-eared Owl. Several specimens have been taken in this neighbourhood, one at Copy Wood, near Middleton, 1868, another at Pilsworth, 1869. Though designated common, it is far from being so.

O. brachyotus ; Short-eared Owl. A very rare bird in this neighbourhood ; one was taken at Rawtenstall, 1868, another at Pilsworth, 1870.

From this historical document I extracted information about birds in the Cockey Moor area during the 1870's:

Golden-crested Wren (Goldcrest). The nest and eggs of this bird have been taken at Cockey Moor, as well as Reddish Wood.

Grey-bob (Lesser redpoll). This bird breeds but sparingly about Bury. Its nest has been taken at Cockey Moor Woods

Spotted Flycatcher. A very common and interesting little bird, breeding freely about Prestwich and Cockey Moor.

Wryneck. A rare bird ; never very plentiful. One was shot at Prestwich, 1871; another at Cockey Moor, in the same year; it was once a common summer visitor.

Goatsucker (Nightjar). The eggs of this singular bird have been brought to the Bury Natural History Society from Chat Moss, by Mr. Robert Kay. The bird has been shot both at Birtle, 1868 and Cockey Moor, 1869, Slight nest of dry grass and leaves, breeding at Birtle and at Cockey Moor.

Golden Oriole. A young bird was shot at Cockey Moor, 1868, by C. Jackson, and another was in its company

Crossbill. Found in tall fir trees close to the top. Flattish nest of twigs, roots, dry grass, and hair-like roots for a lining. One nest found at Cockey Moor Wood in 1865.

Present day changes in bird populations in Cockey Moor

On the way up

Canada Goose

Goldfinch

Carrion Crow

Coot

Dipper

Great Crested Grebe

Nuthatch

Woodpigeon

Collared Dove

Buzzard



Goldfinch

These birds have been able to adapt to environmental changes that effect their habitat and food sources. The prime example of this is the Canada Goose. It was unknown in this area until the 1970's. Now this species is a pest in most urban parks. The spread of urban housing estates with gardens has seen the population of Collared Doves explode. The latest “invader” is the Ring Necked Parakeet.

On the way down

Cuckoo

Curlew

Snipe

Redshank

Corncrake

Partridge

Lapwing

Ring Ouzel

Turtle Dove



Corncrake

These birds have failed to adapt. Primarily their habitat and nesting sites have been reduced by urban development. This is a nation wide problem. Nightingales and Cuckoos are now so rare in Britain that neither can be counted as iconic birds any more. Turtle doves and Cuckoos are also effected by changes to their wintering grounds (mainly in Africa) where they face much greater persecution from humans as well as loss of habitat.

Now ask me about Hen harriers and Red grouse.....that's a whole other can of worms.