

# **Manor Woods Valley Local Nature Reserve**

## **The Birds of Manor Woods Valley Local Nature Reserve 2018-2023**



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# 1. Introduction and Methodology

Manor Woods Valley Group member, Peter Loy-Hancocks, collated his own observations, and publicly available reports and records of birds in Manor Woods Valley Local Nature Reserve covering the years 2018 to 2023. Sources of reports and records included local newsletters and social media sites, Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC) open access records, iNaturalist online recording records and the National Biodiversity Network atlas (NBN). Some of the aforementioned sources feed their data into the BRERC data base and vice-versa, so there may be some duplication of these records.

The order in which birds are considered in this report follow that in the British Ornithologists' Union, British List: A Checklist of Birds of Britain (10th edition) 2022.



Figure 1: Manor Woods Valley

## 2. Records and Reports

### Waterfowl (Anseriformes)

There is a single record of Canada Goose in Manor Woods Valley, but it is not known if this bird was flying over or had alighted on the site. A pair of Mute Swans used to be present on the silt trap pond between its construction in the mid-1970's until it silted-up in the late 1990's. Since the pond is defunct there are no opportunities for Swans to use the site now.



Teal

At least one pair of Mallards are usually present. The occasional presence of ducklings on the slack water immediately above the dam testifies to the importance of this area for ground-breeding birds. Mallard numbers tend to increase in the winter. Up to six Teal were usually present during the winter months up to 2021; however, none have been reported since then.

### Landfowl (Galliformes)

A male and female Common Pheasant were present in the Rabbit Field and Manor Woods Orchard during 2018.

Outside of the time period considered in this report, but worth noting, was a report of a Golden Pheasant sighted near the cycle-path in 2000.



Pheasant

### Pigeons (Columbiformes)

Wood Pigeons are very common in Manor Woods Valley, being observed on any visit to the site. Their sparse, empty, nests are often seen in scrub trees during the winter. Remains of their distinctive white eggs are often found on the ground during the summer months, sometimes neatly cut in half by the emerging chick and at other times roughly broken by predators.

Records of Rock Doves actually refer to Domestic/Feral Pigeons; the latter being the domesticated descendants of the former. They are commonly seen and heard, often being associated with gardens surrounding the site.

Collared Doves were unknown in the UK before 1953. They first bred three years later and are now a very familiar part of our bird-scape. They are often associated with gardens, but are commonly seen flying across and over Manor Woods Valley.

## **Rails (Gruiformes)**

There are only four records of Water Rail from the 'Avon' area in the BRERC online database. All are relatively recent and all are from south of the Avon. One of these records relates to a Water Rail that the author of this report saw on the bank of the Malago in Manor Woods Valley in 2018.

Moorhens are often seen on the slack-water section of the Malago, immediately above the dam. As with Mallards the occasional presence of chicks indicate that they breed in this relatively undisturbed part of the site.

## **Shorebirds (Charadriiformes)**

Woodcock are rarely encountered in the Bristol area, however one was seen on the bank of the Malago in Old Manor Wood, during the winter bird survey of 2022-23.

Herring Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gulls are closely related. They are both common in the Bristol area and are often seen flying over Manor Woods Valley.

## **Storks & Herons (Ciconiiformes)**

Grey Herons and the Little Egrets, occur infrequently along the Malago in Manor Woods Valley. The latter species was once a very rare visitor from the Mediterranean. It first bred in the UK in 1996, and now occurs throughout England and Wales. These two species no doubt feed on the Three-spined Sticklebacks and Bullheads that are known to inhabit the Malago in good numbers.

## **Raptors (Accipitriformes)**

Three species of raptors have been recorded in Manor Woods Valley. Sparrowhawks are commonly seen in their very fast hunting-flight around the edges of the woodlands and scrub. Buzzards are often seen and heard overhead and sometimes perched in trees. Since their re-introduction into southern England and the recovery of the relict Welsh population, Red Kites are being seen more and more frequently over South Bristol, including Manor Woods Valley.

## **Owls (Strigiformes)**

In 1999 the Malago Valley Conservation Group bought owl nest-boxes, which, under the direction of the Hawk and Owl Trust, it positioned on the sides of trees in Manor Wood, away from well used public areas. Tawny Owls were recorded as calling on-site three years later. Today, few evening, and sometimes daytime, visits to Manor Woods Valley pass without hearing Tawny Owls hooting. They still breed on the site, as a family group was encountered in 2022. Regurgitated Tawny Owl 'pellets' containing the fur and skeleton remains of their mainly small rodent prey are occasionally found.

In 2000 an escaped Snowy Owl was seen and recaptured in Manor Woods Valley.

## **Kingfishers (Coraciiformes)**

For many, the highlight of a visit to Manor Woods Valley is a glimpse, and sometimes even a longer view, of a Kingfisher. These enigmatic little birds may even nest on the site occasionally. They are most often seen near the dam or the Dog Leap; places where one of their favourite prey species, Three-spined Sticklebacks, are known to occur at their greatest densities.

## **Woodpeckers and allies (Piciformes)**

Ecosystem engineers are species that create, destroy, modify, or maintain habitats in significant ways. They create conditions for other species to benefit from. While the activities of some ecosystem engineers at times appear to damage the environment, their activities are often crucial to the survival of other species. The engineers include beavers, elephants and prairie dogs, and woodpeckers. The latter demonstrate their ecosystem engineering in Manor Woods Valley, when they excavate nest holes in the limbs of Oak trees, that are used by other hole nesting birds in subsequent years.

There is an Oak tree bough in Manor Woods Valley in which Greater Spotted Woodpeckers created a new, higher, nest hole each year for several years in a row up to 2022. In 2022, the lower most hole was used by nesting Nuthatches at the same time as the newly created upper-most hole was being used by Greater Spotted Woodpeckers. This bough was not used by Woodpeckers in 2023. Territorial drumming by Greater Spotted Woodpeckers is often heard reverberating across the site in the spring.



Greater Spotted Woodpecker

## **Falcons (Falconiformes)**

Peregrines are widespread in the Bristol area. A likely Peregrine was seen over Manor Woods Valley in June 2022, but they are likely to occur more often than this.

## **Parrots (Psittaciformes)**

Feathers from a predated blue Budgerigar were found on the cycle-path near the centre of Manor Woods Valley in 2019.

## **Perching Birds (Passeriformes)**

Most of the UK's crow species are represented in Manor Woods Valley. Jays are commonly seen, and even more commonly heard. These attractive, noisy, birds are the main agent of the spread of Oak trees. They gather fresh acorns in the autumn and bury them, as a winter food, in areas of open grassland. Many of these acorns are

never retrieved and eaten, but instead germinate and start growing into new trees the following year. Most of these seedlings are mown or grazed off, but the occasional one survives to grow into a full-size tree. Oak seedlings are often seen in the wildflower meadows of Manor Woods Valley, before they are mown off in the late summer.

Magpies abound on Manor Woods Valley. Their large domed nests are sometime visible in taller scrub bushes. In the winter they move around the site in large noisy groups.

Groups of Jackdaws occasionally move through the site or gather in larger trees on its edges. Pairs, family groups or larger winter gatherings of Carrion Crows are commonly seen, especially on the large wildflower meadow. Ravens nest on, or in a tall tree near to, the television mast at the extreme northeast end of the site. Their distinctive 'croaking' call is frequently heard overhead, and looking up usually reveals the presence of a pair or a family group.



Carrion Crow

An unconfirmed call of the relatively uncommon Marsh Tit was heard near the dam in 2023. Blue Tits, Great Tits and Long-tailed Tits abound on the site. The former two

species nest in woodpecker holes and nest boxes that were installed across the woodlands and Manor Woods Orchard, by the Manor Woods Valley Group in 2019. At least some of these were subsequently occupied by nesting Great Tits. Long-tailed Tits usually nest in dense Bramble and other scrub patches which occur throughout the site. In the winter mixed flocks of all the tit species regularly move through the tree tops and scrub patches, seeking safety in numbers whilst they forage for invertebrates.



Blue Tit

At least five warbler species have been recorded in Manor Woods Valley, namely Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Grasshopper Warbler, Blackcap and Goldcrest. The first four of these are entirely or mainly summer visitors. Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps are especially common during the nesting season. Goldcrests are present all year and most usually seen foraging in conifers near to the St Peters Rise and Vale Lane entrances to the site.

For such a small bird, the song of the Wren is amazingly loud. This song is commonly heard in the woods of Manor Woods Valley. Like Great and Blue Tits, Nuthatches nest in woodpecker holes in Old Manor Wood. They reduce the diameter of oversized holes by applying mud, which then hardens, to the edges of the hole. In 2022, Nuthatches nested in an old woodpecker hole in the same Oak bough that Greater Spotted Woodpeckers were still nesting in.



Nuthatch nesting in woodpecker hole

Diminutive, well camouflaged, Treecreepers are occasionally spotted foraging on the trunks of Oaks on Old Manor Wood. Starlings are often seen in association with gardens around the site.

All five of our lowland thrushes occur in Manor Woods Valley. Song Thrushes are much less common than they used to be; however, Manor Wood Valley is home to a



Blackbird

healthy population. Mistle Thrushes are seen and heard occasionally. Blackbirds are one of the most abundant birds on the site, inhabiting all of the woodland and scrub habitats. In winter their numbers are augmented from migrant birds arriving from Scandinavia. These winter migrants are accompanied by Redwings and Fieldfares. The greatest numbers of the latter three species are usually to be found in Manor Woods Orchard foraging on windfall apples.



Robin



Grey Wagtail

Dunnocks are often seen skulking through Brambles. Grey Wagtails are usually present along the rocky areas of the Malago. It is thought that they nest inside the interceptor 'cage'.

Four finch species have been recorded in Manor Woods Valley in recent years. Chaffinches and Greenfinch are common, but are usually heard rather than seen. Bullfinches tend to be most obvious when they are foraging on Bird Cherry blossom on the edge of Allotment Wood in the spring. The delicate twitters of Goldfinches are commonly heard on the site.



Bullfinch

### **Birds Not Recorded**

Several locally commonly occurring species have not been 'officially' recorded on or over the site, but are likely to at least occasionally occur; these include Black-headed Gull, Kestrel, Green Woodpecker, Rook, Swallow, House Martin, Whitethroat and Linnet. Further survey work and reporting should help to determine if these species occur in, or over, Manor Woods Valley.

The large wildflower meadow appears to represent ideal nesting habitat for Skylarks, with the potential to support at least two breeding pairs based on its size, but they do not occur here.

## **3. Abundance of Birds Species**

With the exception of the winter survey conducted in 2022/23, none of the data contained in the sources studied was gathered or recorded with the aim of assessing true or relative bird numbers. There is however some quantitative information that can be gleaned from these additional sources, for example it is possible to ascertain which species were recorded most often across the site, in each source.

According to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) report '*Population estimates of birds in Great Britain and the United Kingdom*' published in 2020, the five most common birds at that time were Wren (8,500,000 pairs), Robin (7,350,000 pairs), House Sparrow (5,300,000 pairs) and Woodpigeon (5,150,000 pairs), with Chaffinch and Blackbird sharing the number five spot (5,050,000 pairs each).

By comparison the Manor Woods Valley winter bird survey of 2022-23 recorded Woodpigeon 100 times, Blackbird 61 times, Great Tit 49 times, Robin 41 times and Magpie 40 times.

The five most common bird records from Manor Woods Valley in BRERC online records are Blackbird (17), Robin (12), Woodpigeon (11), Wren (8) and Grey Wagtail (6).

iNaturalist has Woodpigeon (7 records), Grey Wagtail and Robin (6 each), Jay (4), Blackbird, Long-tailed Tit and Song Thrush (3 each), and Chiffchaff, Moorhen, Blackcap, Magpie, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Mallard (2 each) as the top five records.

NBN has many bird records relating to Manor Woods Valley (some are likely to be duplicates of the aforementioned records). The top five are Blackbird (40), Woodpigeon (33), Wren (26), House Sparrow and Robin (24 each), and Magpie (16).

It isn't possible to detect statistically significant trends in bird species populations using the data sources identified in this report; however, some anecdotal observations can be made; for example, the apparent absence of overwintering Teal during the winters of 2021/22 and 2022/23, and Moorhens and Mallard chicks were apparently not observed during the 2022 and 2023 breeding season. Despite their presence in 2018, Pheasants have apparently failed to establish or subsist in Manor Woods Valley. All of these birds are relatively large, and in the case of the latter three species, ground nesting.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Over fifty bird species have been recorded in Manor Woods Valley during the period 2018-2023. Three of these are common to the list of the top five most abundant UK species in all four of the Manor Woods Valley data sets, namely Robins, Woodpigeons and Blackbirds. Magpies occur in the top five of three of the data sets. Any visit to Manor Woods Valley will quickly lead to sightings of all of the aforementioned birds.

Many of the species described in this report, occur seasonally. Winter migrants include Fieldfares and Redwings that breed in Scandinavia. Native Blackbird, Robin and Woodpigeon populations are augmented from winter visitors from this region too. Summer migrants include warblers such as Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers. It should be noted however, that with the trend towards milder winters, at least the first two of the aforementioned species are often overwintering in the UK.

It is possible that the observations, if reflecting a real on-site change, with regards to the recent lack of evidence of breeding in ground nesting birds could be due to increased disturbance. The 2023 edition of PDSA (The People's Dispensary for Sick Animals) Animal Wellbeing (PAW) report shows that the rate of ownership of dogs increased from 26% of UK adults owning a dog in 2011 to 29% in 2023, with the estimated dog population rising from 8.3 million in 2011 to 11 million in 2023. There has been an apparent, but unquantified, increase in dog activity in Manor Woods Valley, especially since 2020.

Dogs are required to be kept under 'close control' in Manor Woods Valley Local Nature Reserve, but many are left to run free, often out of sight of their owners, with the potential to disturb ground nesting birds and over-wintering waterfowl in particular. The lack of breeding Skylarks in the large Wildflower Meadow and apparent recent lack of ducklings and Moorhen chicks may be due disturbance by people and dogs.

It is hoped that this report will encourage members of the public to report sightings of birds in Manor Woods Valley to BRERC or one of the other recording schemes, and also to encourage dog owners to keep their charges under close control and preferably on leads during the bird nesting season.