

2016 Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Annex 1 bird survey results

Please find below a table showing the 2016 bird survey results for the Thames Basin Heaths SPA, coordinated and compiled by 2Js Ecology. The table shows that in 2016, of the three Annex 1 species, only Nightjar maintained its population in the normal range. Woodlark continued to decline and Dartford Warbler numbers, although still high, were lower than in 2015. More detailed discussion of all three species is given below.

Survey year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Nightjar	326	337	320	325	355	306	332
Woodlark	159	161	202	135	155	137	117
Dartford W.	38	47	87	118	292	456 ¹	427

¹ Total incorrectly given as 451 in 2015 report.

Nightjar

The Nightjar survey produced a count of 332 for the SPA (including peripheral areas). This is 8.5% higher than the 2015 estimate, but still 6.5% lower than in 2014. The total of 355 in 2014 was the highest since monitoring began in 2003.

Despite annual fluctuations, the population has stayed fairly constant with the 2016 total comfortably within the 295-355 range observed since 2004. This stability may be due to the fact that Nightjars spend their winters in sub-Saharan Africa and are therefore not subject to pressures caused by harsh winter conditions in this country. Furthermore, Nightjar are rather more catholic in their choice of breeding habitat than the other Annex 1 species. However, without management, habitat does deteriorate over time. The species is also vulnerable to disturbance, particularly by dogs off their leads and livestock, predation and to poor weather conditions during the breeding season. These factors probably represent the greatest threats to their continuing success on the SPA although external factors such as problems on their wintering grounds or during migration cannot be ruled out. It is noteworthy that other trans-Saharan migrants, including Cuckoo and Turtle Dove, have suffered major population declines in southern England.

Woodlark

The 2016 Woodlark count of 117 territories was the lowest since the current survey programme began in 2003. This is a disappointing result, continuing the decline that has occurred over the past decade and representing a 49% fall from the peak of 229 in 2007. It is also 21% below the 1997 total of 149 on which the SPA was established. The reductions in 2016 occurred across most of the SPA sites with notable exceptions on Ash to Brookwood, where the territory count increased from 22 in 2015 to 29 in 2016, and Hazeley Heath with an increase from four to six. At

Ash to Brookwood, the increase is likely to have been due to open habitat created by the major fire that occurred in spring 2015. At Hazeley Heath, clearance work by the RSPB most probably facilitated the increase.

It is likely that habitat availability and quality are the prime factors affecting Woodlark numbers on the SPA. It is noteworthy that the high numbers in 2007 occurred following extensive ground clearance carried out by the Ministry of Defence on several of the largest sites. Unfortunately, cleared ground does not remain in prime condition for Woodlark without on-going management. The grazing regimes employed widely across the SPA, are successful in slowing down the rate of regrowth, but require additional measures to maintain the sparsely vegetated landscape required for this species to prosper. Numbers are always highest in areas that have been manually cleared or have suffered from accidental heathland fires.

Dartford Warbler

The Dartford Warbler count of 427 territories was lower than the 2015 count of 456. This is the first down-turn since 2010, reversing the recovery that occurred following the harsh winters of 2008/09 and 2009/10. Not all sites suffered a decline, for example, the long anticipated recolonization of Hazeley Heath occurred in 2016 with the occupation of four territories. Elsewhere, the largest increases were at Chobham Common, where numbers climbed from 79 territories in 2015 to 84 in 2016 and at Bourley & Long Valley, from 43 to 46.

Historically, the site holding the highest numbers has been Ash to Brookwood but the count of 88 in 2016 was 17 down on 2015 and 30 below 2014. Interestingly, declines were particularly noticeable at a number of small sites adjacent to the Ash and Pirbright Range Danger Areas, and also at Horsell Common. 2Js highlight in the narrative of the 2016 report that it should be recognised that when numbers get high, accurate counts become increasingly difficult. It is therefore possible that there is an element of under-counting in the results but, despite this, it is clear that the rapid growth in numbers stalled in 2016. It is difficult to explain the declines recorded, but possibly 2015 was a poor breeding season on some sites or, more likely, there was increased mortality in early spring due to a series of severe frosts which occurred at the time of year when food supplies are at their lowest.

Continuing mild winters should permit further population growth on those sites where the optimum breeding habitat of mature heather interspersed with low to medium height gorse is not fully occupied. However, scrub invasion remains an issue which requires regular mechanical intervention to supplement the current grazing regimes.

Comparison with citation population levels

The populations of the three Annex 1 birds that were originally quoted in support of the establishment of the SPA together with the years in which the survey data were obtained are given in the table below.

Populations of Annex 1 Species Cited in Support of Establishing the Thames Basin Heaths SPA

Annex 1 species	Population (survey date)	% GB population
Nightjar	264 pairs (1998-99)	8%
Woodlark	149 pairs (1997)	10%
Dartford Warbler	445 pairs (1999)	28%

Comparison of the data in the table above with the 2016 survey data indicates that in 2016 the Nightjar population remained well above that on which the SPA was established, Woodlarks continued to decline, falling well below that level while Dartford Warblers, having recovered to just above designation levels in 2015, sank slightly below it in 2016.

The changes are: Nightjar +25.8%, Woodlark -21.5% and Dartford Warbler -4.0%. With the 2016 Nightjar numbers continuing in their normal range and Dartford Warblers, while down on 2015, maintaining a healthy population, Woodlark is clearly the species requiring priority attention.