Reptiles and Birds at The Newalls

SUSAN LIMBREY

Some of the changes since I moved here in 1981 are attributable to garden management, and some to farming practices in the adjoining fields, but some of the losses and gains of species are clearly part of regional and wider issues.

I saw Adders in the garden as soon as I moved in, but sightings became regular once I had installed refuges and built a small dry-stone wall. One or two gravid females would move in and out of the meadow below the garden to bask as the sun moved round and to keep warm under the refuges or among the stones of the wall. The females sometimes came up to the house; I once found one curled up beside me as I sat dozing on warm bricks, it retreated into a hole in the house wall. On two occasions one came indoors. I suspect that years free of Wood Mice invading the house could be credited to them. Three males were frequent visitors using the refuges, and juveniles appeared in some years. Learning from Sylvia Sheldon, I could recognise individuals and followed their appearances from year to year. One female and three males, one new to me, were regulars in 2016, but that year I found one male dead with a peck wound in the side of his head, and the female dying from a savage wound to her body, which I attributed to a smug-looking cat sitting on the dry-stone wall. She must have been retreating into the wall and could not turn in defence when the cat attacked. I saw one juvenile female just outside the garden that year, but have not seen any adders here since then.

Before I created a pond in 2001/2, I only occasionally saw Grass Snakes. Thereafter, they came to swim and hunt and to bask on, and hide under the stones around the pond, moving to and from large long-term covered compost heaps where they laid clutches of eggs. Several times I saw big fat females arriving from the surrounding hedgerows. Long thin males and immature females arrived too. Those that I presume to be males swim repeatedly round the edge of the pond and between the emergent plants, heads above water and continually sensing the air with their tongues. I suspect they are tracking females. At least four females have laid their eggs in the compost heaps in any one year. The eggs emerge as chains which curl round into a mass, clutches sometimes separated, but often piled up together. When the compost is turned in the winter after eggs have hatched individual clutches can be identified and egg cases counted. The highest number of hatched eggs for one summer was more than 600, with more than 200 in other years. While clutches can have up to 40 eggs, this suggests more females than I see come to lay in the compost. In 2020 the compost heap over-heated and many of the eggs didn't hatch. In one case a fully formed baby snake must have been close to hatching. Hatchlings disperse quickly, only a few remaining in the compost, and I suspect birds rapidly reduce their numbers. In early October 2022 there were ten hatchlings on the compost heap, and in 2023, the warmth in late September brought two out into the open.



Adult and juvenile Slow-worm with Grass Snake at The Newalls Susan Limbrey

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Slow Worms also use the refuges, and on the compost heaps they can be tangled in uncountable numbers along with the Grass Snakes. Unseasonal warmth on 16th December 2023 brought a tiny Slow Worm out onto the doorstep. While Slow Worms seem to be equally abundant through the years, Common Lizards are significantly increasing. I saw them only rarely when I was first here, but they have been a frequent sight in recent years, basking on stones and on the paving slabs of doorsteps, with juveniles increasingly common.

Most of the common resident birds are holding their own. Great, Blue, Coal, and Marsh Tits are abundant, nesting in boxes in the garden and often appearing on feeders within seconds of food being put out, with Long-tail Tits, which nest in hedges and thickets nearby, often joining them. Wren numbers fluctuate, but they seem to recover quickly after a hard winter knocks them back and usually nest in or close to the garden. Dunnocks are usually about, looking for food under the feeders, and there are always Robins nearby. Nuthatches and Tree Creepers nest in the garden or nearby, the former joining the tits on the feeders, the latter feeding on the trees. Resident Blackbirds, which often nest in the old sheds, are joined by winter immigrants, demolishing berries from November onwards. Song Thrushes also nest locally; Mistle Thrushes are less common but often sing from the top of the big Ash tree. Starlings used to nest in holes in the Ash tree, but not now, and though they flock nearby I rarely see them in the garden.

Losses among the birds include the Tree Sparrows that used to nest in the house wall, Redstarts and Pied Flycatchers that used my nest boxes, though the latter still nest half a mile to the west in the Betts Reserve. I rarely see a Chaffinch now, but Bullfinches, which had declined severely, have made a bit of a comeback in the last two years. Greenfinches used to nest in the hedge here, and would come back as a family later in the summer to visit the nest, but they are infrequent now. Goldfinches provide the success story among the finches, having increased enormously, and a pair usually raise two broods in my small Cypress tree.

The field above the garden used to provide cover for nesting Skylarks and Lapwings, but they are long gone, initially perhaps because rotation included regular barley crops whereas now it is grazed or cut for hay. The big additions to the skies since I was first here are Buzzards, which nest nearby, and Ravens, which are often around but their nest sites have not been located. Red Kites appear from time to time. I suspect the buzzards of being responsible for some of the loss of adders. Tawny Owls nest not far away. I used to see Little Owls quite often, but not now. The Barn Owls which roosted among the bales in a barn just up the road have given up since feral cats moved in.

Overall, while loss of particular species is noticeable, reduction in populations is conspicuous in the Spring, when the volume of the dawn chorus is so very much lower than it used to be.



Female Adder basking at The Newalls Susan Limbrey



Grass Snake hatchlings at The Newalls Susan Limbrey