



Friends of the River Crane Environment

Birds at the former Mereway allotments

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The following statement concerns birds at the former Mereway allotment site (referred to throughout simply as “Mereway”). The statement also refers to the “Lower Crane Corridor”, which for the purposes of this statement is defined to be the stretch of the River Crane and its surroundings from the A314 east of Hounslow Heath to the A310 north of Twickenham centre.

This statement is based on:

Personal informal observations at Mereway and throughout the Lower Crane Corridor since July 2001.

Formal ornithological surveys of the eastern section of Crane Park and Kneller Gardens, as part of the British Trust for Ornithology’s London Bird Project (2002-2004).

Reported observations by local residents and members of the London Wildlife Trust at the Nature Reserve in Crane Park West.

General remarks

Mereway plays two important roles in supporting bird life in west London.

The first role is as a habitat in itself. The former allotment site is now covered in dense vegetation, which provides excellent breeding and foraging habitat for a number of bird species. This is particularly enhanced by adjacent woodland and two river channels, creating a mosaic of local habitat that supports a rich bird life.

The second role is as part of the green corridor provided by the River Crane and its immediate surrounds. This corridor links the Thames to the Grand Union Canal and provides a continuous stretch of important wildlife habitat, passing through areas such as Hounslow Heath and Crane Park. As many birds are highly mobile, this corridor provides an important channel for enabling population movement.

We consider each of these aspects separately.

Birds using the Mereway site

Mereway supports a relatively high population of birds, many of which appear to be breeding at the site itself. These are considered in separate categories, dependant on their use of Mereway.

1. The dense bramble cover provides an excellent habitat for foraging birds and, importantly, secure locations for nesting. Resident species benefiting from this, and that as a result are relatively common at Mereway, include Dunnock, Wren and Long-tailed Tit. During the summer they are joined by a couple of migrant warbler species, Blackcap and Whitethroat, both of which also hold several territories at Mereway.

2. The Mereway site also features taller shrubs and trees, providing a mixed habitat that is attractive to a wide variety of bird species, many of which are breeding at the site. Resident species at Mereway include Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Robin, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Great Tit, Blue Tit, House Sparrow and Greenfinch. In summer they are joined by Chiffchaff, with several territories on the Mereway site.
3. A number of relatively mobile species are also regularly encountered at Mereway, and certainly use the site for foraging. These are species that use Mereway as an important component of the Lower Crane Corridor. Some of these are likely to breed at Mereway. Resident species include Tawny Owl, Sparrowhawk, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Green Woodpecker, Great-spotted Woodpecker, Pied Wagtail, Mistle Thrush, Magpie, Jay, Carrion Crow, Starling, and Goldfinch. In winter they are joined by Redwing and Siskin.
4. Several species use the two rivers on either side of the Mereway site. Most of these species also utilise adjacent habitat, and so are users of the Mereway site. Species in this category include Mute Swan, Cormorant, Grey Heron, Mallard, Moorhen and Kingfisher.
5. A couple of summer migrant species, Swift and House Martin, also forage over the Mereway site, but neither of these breed at Mereway itself.

Other birds regularly seen flying over Mereway, but unlikely to be significantly using the habitat, are Feral Pigeon, Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull and Lesser Black-backed gull.

Birds using the Crane corridor

As well as birds that use the Mereway site itself, there are several categories of bird species that appear to use the Crane corridor, and thus by default currently benefit from the natural habitat at Mereway. We again consider these in separate categories:

1. Several species have been noted in the Lower Crane corridor during migration, and may use Mereway during passage. Examples of such species are Swallow, Spotted Flycatcher and Willow Warbler.
2. Several species use other sections of the Lower Crane Corridor and are likely to pass through Mereway on a regular basis. Resident include Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Nuthatch and Jackdaw. Also in this category is Reed Warbler, which breeds at the Crane Island Nature Reserve.
3. Several species have been recorded on nearby sections of the Crane River and are also likely to pass through Mereway. These include Little Grebe (winter visitor to Crane Park), Mandarin Duck, Tufted Duck, Water Rail (winter visitor to Crane Island Nature Reserve), Coot, Common Sandpiper and Grey Wagtail (winters in Crane Park).
4. Two birds of prey are seen along the Crane Corridor and may hunt over Mereway. Kestrels are resident, and in the late 1990's were apparently regularly seen in this section of the Lower Crane Corridor, however are now mostly recorded further west. The summer migrant Hobby is occasionally seen in the Mereway area (I have personally seen them annually above Kneller Gardens, adjacent to Mereway).
5. A number of occasional species have been observed in the Lower Crane Corridor. It is possible that these irregular sightings relate to birds using the Crane Corridor for dispersal. These include Great Crested Grebe, Shoveler, Stock Dove, Skylark and Treecreeper.

Conservation Issues

Every five years the UK's leading non-governmental bird conservation organisations review the status of all bird species in the UK. These findings are published, with all species listed according to various criteria related to population status, size and relative importance. The latest review was published in 2002. Species are categorised into three lists:

Red List: high conservation concern
Amber list: medium conservation concern
Green list: other species

The following tables indicate species either using Mereway, or present in the Lower Crane Corridor, belonging to the Red and Amber Lists.

Species	List	Reason
Song Thrush population over previous 25 years	Red	Rapid (greater than 50%) decline in UK breeding
Starling population over previous 25 years	Red	Rapid (greater than 50%) decline in UK breeding
House Sparrow population over previous 25 years	Red	Rapid (greater than 50%) decline in UK breeding
Kingfisher	Amber	Species of European Conservation Concern
Green Woodpecker	Amber	Species of European Conservation Concern
House Martin breeding population over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) decline in UK
Dunnock breeding population over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) decline in UK
Redwing	Amber	Five-year mean of 1-300 breeding pairs in the UK
Mistle Thrush breeding population over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) decline in UK

Table 1: Species using Mereway site of conservation concern

Species	List	Reason
Spotted Flycatcher population over previous 25 years	Red	Rapid (greater than 50%) decline in UK breeding
Kestrel breeding population over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) decline in UK
Black-headed Gull breeding population over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) decline in UK
Grey Wagtail breeding population over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) decline in UK
Goldcrest breeding population over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) decline in UK
Stock Dove	Amber	More than 20% of European breeding population in UK.
Swallow	Amber	Species of European Conservation Concern
Willow Warbler breeding population over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) decline in UK
Water Rail breeding range over previous 25 years	Amber	Moderate (between 25% and 49%) contraction of UK

Table 2: Species using Lower Crane Corridor of conservation concern

Thus Mereway either directly hosts, or contributes to local populations of, several species of conservation concern. Of particular note on this list are:

Song Thrush: This red listed species is in national decline. Mereway provides good habitat for this species and it is a likely breeder.

House Sparrow: This red listed species is in highly publicised rapid decline in the south-east of the U.K. Several studies are attempting to establish the cause of this. House Sparrows are present at the Mereway site, and are likely breeders.

Duncock: This amber listed species is present in relative high numbers at Mereway, where the dense vegetation provides ideal habitat.

Green Woodpecker: This amber listed species certainly uses the Mereway habitat and may breed there.

Kingfisher: This amber listed species appears to be currently increasing in numbers in the Lower Crane Corridor and interference with habitat along this corridor could have an impact.

In addition to species on the red and amber lists, there are two species on the green list for which Mereway appears to be a significant site:

Whitethroat: Although not nationally under threat, this species is locally uncommon as its preferred habitat is dense vegetation such as that found in hedgerows and scrubland. This is a relatively uncommon species in the Lower Crane Corridor, and Mereway currently supports several breeding pairs, making it a site of local significance.

Chiffchaff: Again this is not a species under national threat, but it is locally uncommon in the Lower Crane Corridor and Mereway appears to support several breeding pairs.

Comment

The intension of this statement is to indicate the significance of the former Mereway allotment site for birds. It is felt that Mereway provides an important local bird habitat, but that more importantly it forms a significant component of the Crane corridor. While any development on the Mereway site would have an obvious impact on birds currently using the site, the negative impact on the Crane corridor as a whole is less easy to determine and possibly more significant.