

# **The Birds of Lewisham 2022**

**Published January 2023  
James Newton**

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost I have to acknowledge my great friend Mike, for without his inspiration (and collection of lists) I very much doubt I would even have developed the inclination to carry out the bird surveys of Lewisham. My old friend of forty plus years and similar Lewisham resident for as many years, Howard, who alerted me the peregrine hunting opposite where he lives in Forest Hill. Rob, a local Corbetter, fellow allotment holder and birdwatcher, who regularly notifies me of his local bird sightings. Many thanks to all the staff and volunteers at the Lewisham nature reserves, but especially to Nick and Anna-Maria at Buckthorne, Ernie at Garthorne and Max at New Cross Cutting. Pippa, Theresa and Debbie from the Friends of Forster Park and their keen interest to incorporate me into the great work they do. All the members of the public who stopped me to ask me what I was doing, all in a very friendly and interested way. Most of all to my partner and his unfaltering patience as I would traipse off of a Sunday to carry out a survey.

# CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b>	Page 1
<b>Introduction</b>	Page 3
<b>Methodology</b>	Page 4
<b>Bird species found in Lewisham 2022</b>	Page 5
<i>Highlights of 2022</i>	Page 5
<b>Bird Observations</b>	Page 7
<i>Raptors &amp; owls</i>	Page 7
<i>Winter &amp; summer migrant species</i>	Page 8
<i>Corvids</i>	Page 8
<i>Waterfowl</i>	Page 9
<i>Other species associated with water</i>	Page 9
<i>Woodpeckers and other woodland specialists</i>	Page 9
<i>Tits and finches</i>	Page 10
<i>House sparrows and other small &amp; medium-sized birds</i>	Page 10
<i>Pigeons and doves</i>	Page 11
<i>Thrushes</i>	Page 11
<i>Parakeets and pheasants</i>	Page 11
<b>Patterns of bird species distribution in Lewisham</b>	Page 13
<i>A note on the Corbett Estate and Forster Park</i>	Page 13
<i>Lewisham Borough nature reserves and cemeteries</i>	Page 13
<i>Species diversity by sector</i>	Page 14
<i>The interrelationship between species diversity, site size and site character</i>	Page 16
<i>Conclusions</i>	Page 18
<b>Becoming an active birdwatcher in Lewisham</b>	Page 19
<b>Future Plans</b>	Page 20
<b>Appendices</b>	Page 21
<b>Useful links</b>	Page 22

## Foreword

It would be a lie to say I deliberated over the title of this paper, work, document, or whatever it becomes. I am not much given to producing clever, catchy titles for anything at all. I briefly pondered 'Birdlife in Lewisham'; but if I had read that as a title, I would expect something about behaviour and biology and other more thorough aspects as our local avian residents. At the time of writing – January 2023 – I have no real idea as to where and how my observations and written records may develop over the long-term; indeed, if at all.

My inspiration to carry out this research comes from my very good friend Mike Clayton-Harding. Mike and I share an interest in wildlife and conservation in general; an interest we have both possessed since childhood. I first met Mike over thirty years ago when I was working with his then girlfriend, now wife Rebecca in a bookshop in Bromley. Some years back Mike's interest in wildlife conservation shifted from the global level to a more local one. He became an avid birdwatcher, and I became increasingly interested in the lists he kept. After several years I too became more interested in British birdwatching – and started keeping my own lists. A few years ago, rather than keeping an annual bird list Mike decided to focus upon recording all the bird species within a three mile radius of his home in Eastbourne, East Sussex – his 'patch'. Every year Mike records an astonishing number of bird species in his area, and in February 2022, the quiet cul-de-sac where he lives on the edge of the South Downs was invaded by local and not so local birdwatchers trying to snap a photo of the American Robin Rebecca sighted in their garden. I cannot think of a person more deserving of receiving such a welcome if unexpected visitor. Mike's passion and commitment to his patch led me to start contemplating about doing something similar. Given the geography of London I felt that a similar three mile radius would not really work from my home in the south of Lewisham Borough. It then occurred to me, well why not Lewisham Borough in its entirety?

Although I have lived several other places in London, the wider UK and also a small stint internationally, I am Lewisham Borough born and bred as is my mum and both my grandfathers. My dad and grandmothers were born in what are now the boroughs of Greenwich and Lambeth. The generations disperse a bit once it gets to the great-grandparents, but there are ancestral lines that are Londoners at least five generations back and quite probably even further. I am in that regard, about as 'Lewisham' as someone can be. I have a fierce loyalty to Lewisham, as it feels to be a London Borough often overlooked in some respects; importantly it is my home.

In comparison to some of the other inner London Boroughs Lewisham holds a lot of potential for bird life. The majority of the borough is still made up of two-storey housing. It contains a lot of green space, gardens of assorted sizes, hidden nature reserves and a small, but lively stream cuts the borough in half, flowing from South to North where it becomes Deptford Creek and enters into the Thames at Greenwich. Lewisham just seemed the natural choice.

There have been other sources of inspiration, and it is only fair to mention them. I collect the New Naturalist Series of books, though guiltily I must confess to never actually having read one. The one I have mentally marked as one I will read is '*A Country Parish*' by A.W. Boyd. This book is a detailed account of the wildlife in a relatively small, defined area: its own 'Lewisham' in a sense. Some years ago my partner bought me a copy of the book '*Grey Daggers and Minotaurs in Greenwich Park: memories of a London schoolboy naturalist in the 1940's*'. Within the book are the authors' accounts of hawfinches not a mile from where I now live; skylarks, red-backed shrikes and redstarts on Blackheath. It says a lot about the state of our nature-depleted island. The English countryside is no haven either; in 2019-2020 I spent 18 months living in Herefordshire, and I can say hand on heart I could see a greater diversity of birdlife within a half a mile of my home in Lewisham than I could in the

midst of our 'green and pleasant land'. Our beloved countryside is effectively an agricultural desert, and one that is expanding even more rapidly than the Sahara most likely.

Taking this into account, how important then is it that our cities become wildlife havens? We have the power to support and nurture habitats to attract and maintain wildlife populations in our cities. There is so much already going on and Lewisham is a prime spot within London for this to develop.

# Introduction

First of all, I have not been paid or voluntarily recruited to do this piece of research into the bird population of Lewisham Borough, not by Lewisham Council, not the London Wildlife Trust, nor the RSPB. I initially made a list of all the open spaces that I knew of, had a look at Google Maps to identify others and further research yielded other locations that pleasantly surprised as being a few potential bird spots I was not even aware of prior to this survey.

This initial process yielded a total 57 spaces to be surveyed, including my own garden on the Corbett Estate in Catford (See Appendix i)). Over the course of the year I managed to identify a further four additional sites; Hillcrest Woods, which I surveyed twice; and Gilmore Road Park, Ravensbourne Park Gardens and Wildcat Wilderness – none of which I managed to visit at all.

In order to make the survey more manageable to carry out I divided the borough into six arbitrary sections dictated by the course of the river Ravensbourne, major roads and adjoining boroughs. Of course, birds are highly mobile creatures, and such definitions mean nothing to them

1. **Waterlink Way** (from Sainsburys in Sydenham up to and including Brookmill Park in Deptford). The river Pool enters Lewisham borough at the Sainsburys store in Sydenham. It joins the River Ravensbourne at Catford and is joined by the Quaggy at Lewisham. The river is bordered by open space and some relatively inaccessible stands of shrubbery along much of its course.
2. **North** (between the A2 and the Thames, bordered on the west by Southwark Borough and on the east by Greenwich Borough). This is undoubtedly the poorest section of Lewisham in terms of birdlife. The parks and open spaces are typically small, fairly barren in terms of plant life and surrounded by multi-storey accommodation or homes with no or very small gardens.
3. **Central West** (between the A2 and the South Circular, bordered on the west by Southwark borough and on the east by the Waterlink Way). This sector contains many of the nature reserves that exist alongside the railway lines and a number of larger open spaces. Human habitation is typically two storey, most with gardens of varying sizes.
4. **Central East** (between the A2 and the South Circular, bordered on the west by the Waterlink Way and on the east by Greenwich borough). This sector is similar in character in terms of human habitation to Central West, but the parks and open spaces are fewer and tend to be smaller in comparison
5. **Southwest** (between the South Circular and the Borough of Bromley, bordered on the west by Southwark borough and on the east by The Waterlink way). Relatively few parks and open spaces, but two of which are comparatively large. Human habitation is typically two-storey and characterised by having medium-large gardens.
6. **Southeast** (between the South Circular and the Borough of Bromley, bordered on the west by the Waterlink Way and on the east by Greenwich borough). The largest of the sectors, with the greatest number of open spaces and parks, several of which are the largest in the borough, including Beckenham Place Park. The human habitations are similarly characterised as the southwest section but having if anything even slightly larger gardens on average.

## Methodology

My initial plan was to thoroughly investigate every site once per quarter in the year. Rather than following the exact year, I divided the year into four broadly seasonal quarters: winter (December – February), spring (March – May), summer (June to August) and autumn (September – November). Given the time available to me between holding down a full-time job and family responsibilities, thorough investigations, and even quarterly visits, of each site proved impossible, nevertheless I DID manage quarterly visits to most sites.

I tried as far as possible to use the same method with each survey; that being a slow casual walk around each site recording as many bird species as possible. These surveys are meant to capture the ***distribution*** of birds in the borough as opposed to ***population sizes***. It is likely that some of the smaller, more unobtrusive species such as coal tits, goldcrests and wrens were likely missed, and their distributions wider within the borough than this research might indicate. Reliable reports from witnesses were also recorded for some of the rarer species; and non-visual, but aural identifications of species have also been included where a visual proved difficult/impossible. It seems churlish to disregard non-visual records.

I did include in the survey birds that I saw flying overhead, rather than just birds that were actually in the parks and open spaces. I mostly saw birds of prey high above, and as best I would assign them to the nearest identified site on the list. Hence a common buzzard seen in Mayow Park would mean most likely it was seen high in the sky, and I guessed the nearest park to be Mayow Park. I followed a similar policy when recording the location of swifts. Gulls flying overhead were more problematic in respect of my identification skills so I would ignore high flying gulls.

There were a number of limitations it was impossible to mitigate for in respect of conducting the fuller surveys as I would have liked. Perhaps having the greatest impact was time: I am in full time employment with family and other community/ voluntary commitments. Secondly was negotiating time to visit some of the reserves with specific opening times and run by volunteers who themselves are juggling work and personal commitments. I am particularly indebted to the staff and volunteers at these reserves who enabled me to conduct surveys. Thirdly, the weather – though in 2022 it was less the cold, wet days of winter and spring as opposed to the very hot summer that kept me indoors. Finally, and more minor in nature, was the presence of aggressive dogs. Unfortunately, there are a minority of dog-owners who still feel it perfectly acceptable to let their ill-behaved pets loose. I had several unpleasant encounters with dogs whilst carrying out surveys, which put me off thoroughly exploring certain areas on those days.

## Bird species found in Lewisham in 2022

The table below depicts the sixty-three species recorded at least once in Lewisham Borough between 1<sup>st</sup> February 2022 and 30<sup>th</sup> November 2022

Black Headed Gull	Goldcrest	Mistle Thrush
Blackbird	Goldfinch	Moorhen
Blackcap	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Mute Swan
Bluetit	Great Tit	Nuthatch
Brent Goose	Green Woodpecker	Peregrine Falcon
Canada Goose	Greenfinch	Pied Wagtail
Carrion Crow	Grey Heron	Red Kite
Chaffinch	Grey Wagtail	Redwing
Chiffchaff	Greylag	Ring Necked Parakeet
Coal Tit	Herring Gull	Robin
Collared Dove	House Sparrow	Song Thrush
Common Buzzard	Jackdaw	Sparrowhawk
Common Gull	Jay	Starling
Common Pheasant	Kingfisher	Stock Dove
Common Whitethroat	Lesser Black Backed Gull	Swift
Coot	Little Egret	Tawny Owl
Cormorant	Little Grebe	Treecreeper
Duncock	Long Tailed Tit	Tufted Duck
Egyptian Goose	Magpie	Willow Warbler
Feral Pigeon	Mallard	Woodpigeon
Garden Warbler	Mandarin Duck	Wren

### Highlights of 2022

There were a number of highlights for me in respect of carrying out the survey. In February 2022 at approximately 6.30am my partner and I awoke to the distinctive call of a Tawny Owl outside our bedroom window – it sounded very close. It was still dark so did not expect to see anything, but within a minute the distinctive shape of the Tawny Owl dropped out of our neighbours Leylandii trees and flew slowly across the gardens, heading towards Hither Green Cemetery.

In Hither Green Cemetery itself in late spring I spied two birds that I could not initially see clearly through the foliage. With patience I was able to discern an unmistakable pair of Greenfinch, that sadly declining species. One of them was carrying nesting material, so I hope they managed to rear young.

In late summer, at the end of the very hot episode, I was walking the Waterlink Way between Sydenham and Catford. Where the bridge crosses the river Pool at Bellingham is a good place to spot Kingfisher and small birds that come to the shallows there to drink and bathe. Wholly unexpected and equally thrilling was the sight of a male Blackcap in the shrubbery on the west bank, and a Whitethroat and Willow Warbler squabbling at the waters edge on the east bank. The latter two were the only times I had seen either bird during my surveys.



Perhaps most dramatic of all was the experience I had in November on my allotment on the Corbett Estate. One afternoon, my partner and I were having a little stroll on our allotment when we heard geese flying over. It is fairly common to see Canada Geese fly over, but there was something different about the call of these three geese and their shape. Fortunately for us, one landed right on our neighbour's allotment from where we were able to conclusively identify it as a Brent Goose. I have been told that this is only the third record of the species in Lewisham.



# Bird observations

## Raptors and owls

Prior to conducting the survey I had been aware of fairly regular sightings of sparrowhawks in Lewisham, but little other knowledge as to raptors and owls in Lewisham. In the early 1980's I recall our local Catford greengrocer talking about an owl he had seen in daylight on the house opposite his shop, and in the last several years I had heard owls during the winter months from my bedroom window. Several years ago I disturbed a common buzzard whilst walking in Sydenham Hill Woods (Southwark Borough); and in one blustery day in spring of 2021 I was alerted to a pair of Red Kites gliding across my own home in a southeast – northwest direction. Through the survey of 2022 I included my own visual reports and those of trusted friends, reserve wardens, volunteers and members of the public. Given how many raptor and owl sightings came from within or very near to the Lewisham Nature reserves, their importance cannot be over-emphasized.

Sparrowhawks are perhaps the most commonly seen species locally, rarely a year goes by without a local person with my community on the Corbett Estate post a picture of one they have seen in their garden. In the course of the survey in 2022 I had three visuals myself, one in my back garden, another in Grove Park Nature Reserve and another one in Mayow Park. I had a very good report from the wardens of Buckthorne Nature Reserve who witnessed a pair at close range – quite possibly a mated pair.

Common Buzzards were typically reported flying high above, and were witnessed in a few locations in the southern sections of Lewisham; the most dramatic sighting being of three circling together high above Sydenham one warm day in May. During the winter surveys I spoke to a local dog walker in Chinbrook Meadows who told me of regularly seeing buzzards there; and indeed I disturbed one during my autumn survey in November. Whilst visiting Devonshire Road Nature Reserve in the spring, along with my partner and mum, we watched as a Common buzzard flew up from the railway track and flew into Garthorne Nature Reserve.

Red Kites were seen a few times, their distinctive shape and colouring providing unmistakable identification. Always seen flying high and never perching, and usually seem to be travelling in a southeast to northwest direction.

A Peregrine Falcon seems to be hanging around fairly consistently in the winter and autumn months around the former church, now known as The Apostles on South Road in Forest Hill. My very good friend Howard, lives opposite and mentioned a bird of prey taking out the odd pigeon. I asked him for a description, and he gave a fairly good account of a Peregrine. This was summarily proved correct following some additional online investigation of local birdwatcher reports.

I only had one confirmed sighting of a Kestrel, and this was again high above the Corbett Estate. Some years ago Kestrels were nesting fairly regularly at the top of St Andrews Church on Sandhurst Road, Catford; but I have not heard of any new reports for some time. Evidence of a Kestrel, at least one passing through, was also found from Buckthorne Nature Reserve.

Aside from my own reports of Tawny Owls regularly heard from my own back garden in the winter and autumn months, there was another very clear sighting from Buckthorne Nature Reserve and verbal reports from the Green Chain Walk in North Downham and Chinbrook Meadows. Evidence in the form of feathers was also found in the New Cross Cutting Reserve.

## Winter and summer migrant species

The two migrant species we can with some confidence expect to see arriving in London during the winter are Redwing and Fieldfare – members of the thrush family. Redwing are fairly common most winters and in the first few months of 2022 were recorded in 8 sites surveyed across Lewisham. The closest they were recorded to central London was in Telegraph Hill Upper Park, otherwise they were concentrated in the southeast and central west sections of Lewisham. Fieldfare were not seen at all during the surveys, and I heard no reports of them locally. Several years ago, there was an ‘irruption’ of them, with many people on the Corbett Estate asking about an unfamiliar bird. Subsequent photographs from several sources, clearly indicated Fieldfare, one of which I witnessed several gardens along from my own.

It's not only ‘new’ species that overwinter, but we see an influx of our year-round species coming to stay for the winter or pass through on their way to sunnier climes. Most noticeably perhaps are the various gull species; Black-headed being the most numerous, but also Herring and Lesser black-backed gulls also fairly widespread, and a large group of Common Gulls on Blackheath. Woodpigeons too can also be found in larger flocks, quite possibly their numbers boosted by migrants from northern Europe.

Perhaps the most noticeable of the summer migrants are the screaming swifts that suddenly appear overhead in May. Unfortunately I have not had any contact with the Lewisham Swifts group, although I did attend one of their very interesting presentations at Lewisham Town Hall several years ago. They were counted flying over 12 sites in the spring survey, with some being recorded in the summer survey.

The Waterlink Way Bird Leaflet states that seven warbler species can be found along its length. The two most commonly seen are Chiffchaff and Blackcap, which were both recorded in at least half the sites surveyed in the spring survey. Both species are around all year, but in much reduced numbers. As climate change progresses, these species may well be more common all-year additions to Lewisham wildlife. In the ‘highlights’ section I also mentioned seeing the Willow Warbler and Whitethroat along the Waterlink Way at Bellingham. The other three species mentioned, Lesser Whitethroat, Cetti's Warbler and Reed Warbler I did not manage to see, although I did hear a Reed Warbler between Catford and Ladywell a few years earlier.

As another pleasant surprise was the identification of at least one, possibly two Garden Warblers seen at Horniman Nature Reserve. My identification was clear, but I asked Ernie from Garthorne Road as to the likelihood of this sighting. Ernie – a far more adept and experienced birder than I - informed me that Garden Warblers had in the past been present in the area and it was quite possible that given the time of year seen, that it was very possible that they were passing through on their way to more suitable nesting areas.

## Corvids

Their size and voices make corvids perhaps the most easily spotted and identified of the birds in Lewisham. Magpies and Carrion Crow were the two most often recorded, appearing at most sites throughout the borough. Jays were much less common, although fairly widespread; and Jackdaws rarer seen – only being observed in three locations, namely Beckenham Place Park, Peter Pans Pond at Homebase in Catford and on Blackheath. During the summer survey of Grove Park Cemetery I followed what I thought was a raven; however when I got close enough was revealed to be a Carrion Crow with a distinctive Raven-like call. I do however feel it only a matter of time before Ravens do

appear in Lewisham given the success of this species in the last few years and their expansion into Kent.

## **Waterfowl**

The Ravensbourne/Pool River practically bisects the borough of Lewisham in half. It is joined by the Spring Book at Downham and the Quaggy at Lewisham, as well as a number of other hidden feeder water sources. A number of parks and open spaces within Lewisham follow these water courses, not just the Waterlink Way – the Quaggy through Manor Park for instance, and Spring Brook through Downham Playing fields. There are also ponds of varying sizes at a number of locations, particular noteworthy examples being at Blackheath, Beckenham Place Park, Manor House Gardens, and Peter Pans Pond. It is therefore not that surprising at the number of waterfowl recorded.

Without doubt the most widespread species of waterfowl in the borough is the Moorhen. Found virtually everywhere that water exists bigger than a puddle, in the spring survey I counted five or six pairs along the Waterlink Way between Bellingham and Catford. Not surprising the next most common species of waterfowl was the Mallard. Coot and Tufted Duck were rarer, given their preference for ponds over shallow running water. Little Grebes were only ever seen at the pond in Beckenham Place Park where they appear to be a year round presence, quite comfortable with all the human swimmers. Mandarin Ducks are still uncommon in Lewisham, though not a shy species. I had reliable reports of males in Manor House Gardens and my own sighting was of a group of seven or eight males and females happily being fed by people on the Ravensbourne between Catford and Ladywell.

In terms of the larger waterfowl, namely geese and swans, these are more restricted in their location due to their size and needs. Mute Swans were only found where ponds existed large enough for them to comfortably swim – most frequently Manor House Gardens. As to geese, Canadian are the most widely distributed, but Egyptian seemingly spreading into more areas. Greylag are rarer, but usually found around the pond on Blackheath in quite large numbers. The Brent Goose record has already been mentioned in the Highlights section.

## **Other birds associated with water**

For the sake of coherence I have added all the other birds typically associated with water in this section. Some years ago one of the first birds I added to my annual list was a kingfisher I saw on the Waterlink Way; however during the survey I only managed to see one once in the November at Brookmill Park. Cormorant and Little Egret too proved to be occasional, isolated sightings in Lewisham. Grey Heron is an occasional, but widespread presence. Perhaps my favourite water bird to see is the Grey Wagtail, recorded in every quarterly survey at least once, but most likely to be seen in the winter months along the course of the Waterlink Way and Quaggy.

## **Woodpeckers and other woodland specialists**

Great Spotted Woodpeckers are fairly widespread throughout the borough, whereas Green Woodpeckers are much less common, typically only one sighting of a Green Woodpecker for every three or four Great Spotted. Interestingly though, I found the latter were more likely to be found in the cemeteries than the Great Spotted.

Goldcrest were virtually absent during the winter survey, where I only recorded them from my garden, but they were recorded from 15 different sites in the spring survey. They were still fairly noticeable during the summer and autumn surveys, but I suspect this may have a lot to do with my now familiarity with their calls. The only report of a Treecreeper I received came from Mayow Park, although I had been told by a local BTO member (British Trust of Ornithology) that they have been seen in Forster Park. I had seen them in recent years in Sydenham Hill Woods (Southwark Borough). Nuthatches are fairly well represented in the larger parks and nature reserves of Lewisham.

## **Tits and finches**

Bluetits and Great Tits were by far the most common birds in this category, found throughout the borough in good numbers right through the year, but with numbers recorded peaking for Great Tits in the winter and Bluetits in the spring. Long Tailed Tits were less often recorded, but nevertheless widespread across the borough and in good numbers. Interestingly Long Tailed Tits were recorded less frequently during the spring survey than in any other – this reverses the trend when compared with most other species. This observation may purely be to ‘luck’ or circumstances, but any suggestions as to why this may be are very welcome. My own personal favourite in this group is the Coal Tit: which also happened to be the least frequently recorded. Once again, the only place I recorded them in the winter was my own garden. I am familiar where they can usually be found in Forster Park, and indeed I managed to locate them there in the spring. As a species they appear to be more or less confined to the southeast sector of Lewisham borough.

The most common type of finch found in Lewisham is the delightful Goldfinch, often seen and heard in small flocks throughout the year and throughout the borough, but most commonly recorded in the winter and spring surveys. The other two species are sadly much rarer, with single chaffinches seen in several locations in the central and southern sections of Lewisham in the winter survey. The only records of a small flock were in Forster Park in the spring as part of an organised birdwatching walk. None were recorded in the summer and autumn months. Several years ago in the January, I did see a larger flock of about 10-12 Chaffinches very near to the Hither Green Triangle reserve. Greenfinch was rarer still, with observations only occurring during the spring and summer months in various locations. A pair seen in Hither Green Cemetery carrying nesting material suggests that they may still be a breeding species within the borough, albeit in small numbers.

## **House Sparrows and other small birds & medium-sized birds**

I have a great flock of about 12-15 House Sparrows roosting in the dense holly tree in my garden; and the reason I say this is that it is indicative of where the species is most commonly found. During my surveys House Sparrows were comparatively rare in parks and nature reserves, and indeed usually absent altogether. It was fairly common however to see them in small, noisy groups when I walked between sites along the roads of Lewisham. The clue as always is in the name; ‘House’ Sparrows find being around human more beneficial than being in the ‘wild’ – at least historically. Growing up in London in the 1970’s and 1980’s most people had front gardens, many of which contained dense privet which the sparrows loved – and still do where they occur. Once people began concreting over their front gardens in favour of drives for their cars, so these valuable nesting sites disappeared. Similarly as more and more loft spaces have been repaired and converted into living spaces, the amount of roosting and nesting sites for House Sparrows have disappeared proportionately. Nevertheless House Sparrows are still relatively common and widespread within Lewisham. For some reason House Sparrows were never recorded in the southwest sector, an area otherwise good for most bird species.

The Dunnock is uncommon, but widespread throughout the southeast, southwest and Waterlink Way sectors of Lewisham, but not seen in the central and northern sectors. Most commonly seen during the spring survey, it was nevertheless recorded in every quarter of the year. By far the most widespread of the small birds, the robin occurs virtually everywhere in Lewisham and in good numbers. In every quarter it was one of the most top three most widely reported species throughout Lewisham. Wrens were noticeably less common than robins, but nevertheless widespread and peaking very noisily during the spring survey. The even noisier starlings are similarly widespread within the borough, with records peaking during the spring survey.

## **Pigeons and doves**

The Woodpigeon was the most commonly reported bird in Lewisham in every quarter except for the autumn survey, when it was suddenly knocked into 7<sup>th</sup> place. Quite why this was remains a mystery, these are large, relatively bold birds with a distinctive call – they are not easy to miss. Feral Pigeons formed larger flocks than Woodpigeons in Lewisham but were recorded less frequently. Their recent fall in numbers possibly has something to do with their dependence on humans to provide appropriate roosting places; places now converted into loft accommodation. They are still widespread across the borough, and indeed are probably the most common bird in the north sector.

The easily missed Stock Doves are widespread across Lewisham, particularly in the southeast and central sectors. Typically found in small groups, often with woodpigeons, they are best looked for in the spring months. The delicate looking Collared Dove is the least commonly recorded in this group within Lewisham, though more noticeable than the Stock Dove, it can be seen throughout the borough.

## **Thrushes**

The most commonly recorded of the thrushes in Lewisham is the Blackbird. Of particular note was their comparative lack of presence during the winter of 2021/22 when compared with the winter of 2020/21. I distinctly remember blackbirds being everywhere in 20/21 and in large numbers, but this was not replicated in 21/22. My only guess is that there was an influx of over-wintering migrant blackbirds in 20/21 that was not replicated in 21/22. Otherwise this thrush is found throughout Lewisham and in good numbers. The other over-wintering species has been discussed in the Winter & Summer Migrant Species section of this report.

Both Song and Mistle Thrushes appear to be mostly confined to the southeast, southwest and Waterlink Way sectors of Lewisham, although I was delighted to see a Mistle Thrush in Aragon Gardens in the north sector, a small green space surrounded by multi-storey housing. Song Thrushes are more likely to be encountered than Mistle Thrushes. Mistle Thrush are seen throughout the year in Forster Park.

## **Parakeets and pheasants**

I have lumped Ring Necked Parakeet and Common Pheasant into this last category, mostly as they do not fit neatly into any of the other categories, and they are both introduced species. The same can be said of the Mandarin Duck, Egyptian Goose and Canada Goose, but these comfortably fit within the wildfowl category.

Ring Necked Parakeets are everywhere: a few years ago in the space of about twenty minutes I estimated approximately 600 flew over my garden at dusk on their way to their roost in Hither Green Cemetery. Whether or not they are having a deleterious effect on our native species remains to be seen, the often quoted threat to Great Spotted Woodpecker appears to be groundless, if anything their numbers appear to be on the rise. These are bold, noisy birds that are unmistakable. It may be worth checking flocks for Monk Parakeets, which are a species that too may be increasing in numbers, although I never recorded any during the surveys.

I only recorded a Common Pheasant once, and this was during the spring survey in Beckenham Place Park. Although I did not see the bird, I heard it call. Most years I hear pheasants from my home in Catford. They almost always come from the direction of Hither Green Cemetery/ Grove Park Nature Reserve. I can only assume that these are birds that have made their way up the side of the train tracks from Kent – either that or escapees as some years back several photos were circulated of a very tame female pheasant that had been seen in various gardens on the Corbett Estate.

# Patterns of bird species distribution in Lewisham

## A note on the Corbett Estate and Forster Park

I live on the Corbett Estate, a clearly defined area of Catford, consisting of several thousand houses and a few flats, and quite possibly in the region of eight to ten thousand people. The houses are all two-storey and typically all have medium sized gardens. As I spend most of my time here and am often looking out onto my garden or walking the streets, I often spot both the common and more unusual birds; hence explaining the considerable number of species within a residential area.

Forster Park is a 5 minute walk from where I live, and throughout 2022 I would take a half hour run around the park at least twice a week. It is therefore not surprising that a large number of bird species were recorded there. Similar sized parks in the borough e.g. Wells Park with as great a diversity of habitats – if not more so – would likely have produced even more species had they been my local park.

In summary, wherever mention is made to the Corbett Estate and Forster Park it should always be taken into account that more time was spent in these places than anywhere else and therefore may skew figures in their favour.

## Lewisham Borough nature reserves and cemeteries

Prior to carrying out the surveys in 2022, I was only aware of the Grove Park, Hither Green Triangle, Dacres Wood and Devonshire Road nature reserves: Burnt Ash Pond, Garthorne, Buckthorne and New Cross Cutting were completely unknown to me. Most of these reserves are of a considerable size, given their location in an urban environment. Having now visited each of the reserves several times, each has a distinctive character and its own unique charm. All of them share a border with a railway line and indeed Hither Green Triangle is virtually surrounded by them.

It may come as a surprise that the number of bird species per reserve is actually not that high. All the reserves are really small tracts of woodland; only Grove Park and Devonshire Road having relatively larger areas of meadowland. Birds have evolved to exploit all habitats and therefore Lewisham reserves typically attract woodland specialists or generalists – therefore a visitor is more likely to see more species in one of the larger parks that possesses a greater variety of habitat e.g. Beckenham Place Park, Forster Park, Wells Park. This in no way should detract from their importance, the reserves are much richer in terms of their diversity of plant and insect life. Crucially, as already mentioned, they appear vital as habitats for raptors and owls.

Whilst not designated nature reserves it can easily be argued that Grove Park, Hither Green and Brockley & Ladywell Cemeteries in effect are as important in terms of bird populations, particularly Brockley & Ladywell. The latter contains a large area where old graves have been beautifully taken over by trees and plants and have formed dense patches of shrubbery ideal for nesting birds. Grove Park and Hither Green are newer cemeteries, but their size, proximity to nature reserves and other parks makes them very important. Indeed, Hither Green Cemetery is one of the few places where greenfinches were recorded, and I recently (January 2023) received a report of Greenfinch here.



## Species diversity by sector

The tables below provide a summary of species diversity across Lewisham borough by season. The first column denotes the sector. The second column gives the total number of species recorded in that sector for that season. In the third column I have listed the mean number of species per site; and in the last column the site within that sector that evidenced the greatest diversity of species.

Irrespective of season, the southeast sector always recorded the greatest number of species. This is not really surprising as it contains the huge Beckenham Place Park, and both the Corbett Estate and Forster Park, both of which I recorded species on an ongoing basis rather than one visit per quarter. In addition to this, the southeast sector also contains other large areas of green space; Grove Park and Hither Green cemeteries, Grove Park Nature Reserve and Chinbrook Meadows for example. Similarly it is hardly surprising that the north sector (when it was surveyed) always yielded the least number of species; it is the smallest sector its highly urbanised environment less conducive to a diverse bird population.

Of note though is that although the southeast sector had the greatest number of bird species in every quarter, the mean number of species per site for all seasons was greatest along the Waterlink Way. This really illustrates the importance of water for wildlife diversity. In brief, if you want to see a lot of species in one location, head to where there is water.

In the final column I have listed which site within which sector contained the greatest diversity of species. Sometimes that difference between first and second place was no more than one species, however we can say with some confidence that certain locations are noteworthy. As the North Sector was only surveyed twice, we cannot suggest with which is the best place for birds, but Pepys Park and Folkestone Gardens are probably equally important for distinct reasons: Folkestone Gardens has a pond, and Pepys Park has a good area of dense shrubbery. For the central west sector Hilly Fields appears to be the clear winner; it is large with a good variety of habitat along one side of the park. Buckthorne Nature Reserve came out on top once, but this was due to having insider information from the site wardens who had identified species – that I included - when I was not there. Again Manor House Gardens was the clear ‘winner’ for the central east sector, only once being beaten by Blackheath. Key to both these sites was once again the presence of bodies of water. In the southwest sector there was no competition, with Wells Park evidencing the greatest diversity of species every quarter. Beckenham Place Park was the clear leader in bird diversity in the southeast sector in the winter and spring, and probably would have been had I managed to survey it in the summer. It lost out to the Corbett Estate in the autumn, but as already mentioned there is the matter of the Corbett estate being the place I live and can record from every day should I wish to. In regards the Waterlink Way, there is no clear location that I would deem better than any other. Indeed I will suggest Brookmill Park is probably the best place if someone wishes to see a good selection of bird species in a limited time.

<b>WINTER 2021/22</b>			
SECTOR	Number of species recorded	Mean number of species per site	Most species diverse site
North	20	6	Pepys Park (10 species)
Central West	25	10	Hilly Fields & Horniman Gardens (13 species)
Central East	33	13	Blackheath (19 species)
Southwest	21	10	Wells Park (15 species)
Southeast	40	13	Beckenham Place & Forster Parks (23 species)
Waterlink Way	28	17	Catford – Ladywell Section (20 species)

**SPRING 2022**

SECTOR	Number of species recorded	Mean number of species per site	Most species diverse site
North	Not Surveyed	N/A	N/A
Central West	31	13	Hilly Fields (18 species)
Central East	30	11	Manor House Gardens (19 species)
Southwest	33	15	Wells Park (26 species)
Southeast	43	16	Beckenham Place Park (27 species)
Waterlink Way	30	20	Sydenham - Bellingham Section (22 species)

**SUMMER 2022**

SECTOR	Number of species recorded	Mean number of species per site	Most species diverse site
North	Not Surveyed	N/A	N/A
Central West	27	10	Buckthorne Nature Reserve (14 species)
Central East	30	11	Manor House Gardens (14 species)
Southwest	23	9	Wells Park (16 species)
Southeast	34	10	Forster Park (18 species)
Waterlink Way	24	14	Sydenham - Bellingham Section (15 species)

**AUTUMN 2022**

SECTOR	Number of species recorded	Mean number of species per site	Most species diverse site
North	18	5	Folkestone Gardens (9 species)
Central West	27	10	Hilly Fields (11 species)
Central East	30	11	Manor House Gardens (16 species)
Southwest	23	9	Wells Park (16 species)
Southeast	34	10	Corbett Estate (22 species)
Waterlink Way	24	14	Bellingham - Catford Section (20 species)

## The interrelationship between species diversity, site size and site character

Rather than being a simple record of every bird species seen in Lewisham I wanted to see whether there was any correlation between the number of species present in comparison with the size of the site, the level of human footfall and various **beneficial site features** that are likely to add to the species diversity of any given site.

Allocation of a site to a particular size was arbitrary in regards that I didn't measure the sites, it was more about my own perception of them whilst there and looking at them courtesy of Google Maps so I could incorporate a degree of comparison. I assigned each site a specific size, which were:

- Very Large
- Large
- Medium
- Small
- Very Small

The term 'human footfall' relates to the average level of human activity during the course of my visits, and as some of the sites are very well known to me anyway, I feel my assessment is accurate. Each site was given a specific level of human footfall, namely:

- High
- Medium
- Low

I listed a total of eight 'beneficial site features', and to each site I recorded which features each possessed. Once again these sites are arbitrary inventions of my own, but which I believe have a positive effect upon bird diversity as either standalone features, or in conjunction with others. I have described these beneficial features below:

1. Flowing water – where a stream runs through or borders the site
2. Still water – where a medium-large sized pond is a component of the site
3. Dense shrubbery – describes unmanaged or minimally managed plant growth of up to 5 metres that forms an impenetrable or difficult to penetrate area of the site
4. Woodland – mature trees that form an area of continuous growth, with at least some understory
5. Open space – a field or meadow, either managed for wildlife or human use
6. Domestic garden border – where the site shares at least one border with one or more houses. It is assumed that at least some of these gardens will contain bird feeders and/or nest boxes
7. Railway border – where the site shares a border with a railway line; important as these areas typically see little or no human footfall throughout the year
8. Other green space border e.g. another surveyed Lewisham site, sports field, school grounds

The table below lists the top 11 sites within Lewisham in regards species diversity. The mean number of species per visit was reached by adding the totals of all quarters together for each site and then dividing them by the number of visits. With the notable exceptions of Wells Park and Manor House Gardens, all of the sites showing the greatest diversity were within the southeast or Waterlink Way sectors. With the exception Manor House Gardens and Brookmill Park, all the sites were large or very large in respect of their size: and with the exception of Manor House Gardens and Hither Green Cemetery all the sites had medium level of human footfall. All bar Manor House Gardens had 4 or more *beneficial features*. In terms of beneficial features, all bar Forster Park contained at least one water feature; all shared borders with domestic gardens, and most contained areas of both open space and dense shrubbery.

SECTOR	SITE	Site Size	Human Footfall	Mean number of species per visit	Number of beneficial features
Southeast	Beckenham Place Park	Very Large	Medium	24	8
Southeast	Forster Park	Large	Medium	21	5
Southeast	Corbett Estate	Very Large	Medium	19	4
Southwest	Sydenham Wells Park	Large	Medium	18	5
Waterlink Way	Bellingham to Catford	Large	Medium	17	7
Waterlink Way	Catford Station - Ladywell Station	Large	Medium	17	6
Southeast	Chinbrook Meadows	Large	Medium	17	6
Central East	Manor House Gardens	Medium	High	17	3
Waterlink Way	Sainsburys to Bellingham	Large	Medium	17	7
Waterlink Way	Brookmill Park	Medium	Medium	16	5
Southeast	Hither Green Cemetery	Large	Low	16	5

The table below lists the 10 least species diverse sites in Lewisham. Seven of these sites were in the north sector. The main differences other than sector appear to primarily be a combination of size (typically very small – medium) and the dramatic difference in comparative lack of beneficial features, when compared with the eleven sites showing greatest species diversity. Human footfall is typically low to medium.

SECTOR	SITE	Site Size	Human Footfall	Mean number of species per visit	Number of beneficial features
North	Aragon Gardens	Very Small	Low	5	1
North	Bridgehouse Meadows	Medium	Medium	5	3
North	Evelyn Green	Small	Medium	5	1
North	Fordham Park	Medium	High	5	1
Central West	Luxmore Gardens	Very Small	Low	5	2
North	Eckington Gardens	Small	Medium	4	2
North	Lower Pepys Park	Medium	Medium	4	1
Southeast	Whitefoot Playing Fields	Medium	Low	3	2
Southwest	Home Park	Medium	Medium	2	1
North	Thames Path	Very Small	Medium	1	1

## Conclusions

The level of human footfall appears to bear very little influence as to whether a site shows a high or low species diversity. Many of the birds recorded have lived alongside humans for thousands of years and have adapted; accordingly, the ones that could not are hardly likely to have been seen. Indeed, to varying degrees, humans are beneficial to them.

In respect of beneficial features, as expected the general trend was that with fewer features so the fewer the total number of species present. There is also a general correlation with site size as well, with the larger sites typically possessing a greater number of beneficial features – as we might expect. Perhaps most importantly though are *what* beneficial features add to greater species diversity. Water features, dense shrubbery and having at least some residential gardens bordering a site appear to be the most important beneficial features.

Site size is certainly important when it comes to species diversity, the general trend being the greater size of the site, the more species diversity. I did notice however, that where this proved to not be the case was where a medium or even large site was mostly open space/grass with limited other vegetation and typically in possession of three or less beneficial feature.

## Becoming an active birdwatcher in Lewisham

Hopefully having read this report, people may perhaps think that living in inner city London does not necessarily mean seeing birds is relegated to feeding ducks and pigeons in a park. This survey identified over sixty species that were seen at least once in a one year period. How many other species were present but missed? Don't forget to look up, you never know what you might see circling above you. That slightly 'odd' looking sparrow may actually be a dunnock. Sometimes the diversity of nature is right under your nose, or high above your head.

One of the best things you can do is take part in the annual RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch. This happens the last weekend in January, when younger birds have mostly matured and are less likely to be confused with other species; and the lack of foliage on trees and bushes mean that it is easier to see and count birds. You can do the Big Garden Birdwatch from your own garden, or go to your local park or open space. For several years I have led walks around Forster Park as part of the Big Garden Birdwatch and it always pleases me to be able to point out and see the happy faces as we locate woodpeckers, Mistle Thrushes, Stock Doves and Nuthatches as well as the commoner species. In a good year we can record over twenty species.

Investigate your local birdwatching group. I am a member of the Bromley RSPB Group and the Kent Ornithological Society, the reason being I go into Kent a lot, particularly around the Thames Estuary and the farmlands and woodlands near the East Sussex border. There is an RSPB Central London local group or explore volunteer opportunities and activities with the London Wildlife Trust.

If you are interested in seeing birdlife in Lewisham but regard yourself as a newbie then I would suggest the following sites. If you have time and patience, then I would suggest that Beckenham Place Park or a walk along The Waterlink Way are the best options. Another good option here, for those with time and energy, would be to plan a route that takes in Hither Green Cemetery, Grove Park Nature Reserve, Chinbrook Meadows and Grove Park Cemetery. If you have limited time and/or a young family and you want to see as many types of birds in as short a time as possible then head for one of the parks with water, personally I would suggest Brookmill Park, Manor House Gardens and Wells Park.

## Future Plans

Carrying out the survey took a huge amount of time, time I enjoyed, but nevertheless proved to be something I could not commit to on a regular basis. My current plan of action is to take each year as it comes. For 2023 I have decided to concentrate on my own doorstep, namely The Corbett Estate, Forster Park, Hither Green Cemetery and possibly Grove Park Nature Reserve. My target is to survey each site at least once a month and to at least have a go at recording numbers of birds and behaviours, as well as listing the individual species.

I am currently conducting a daily bird survey of my garden as part of an annual project run by the Bromley RSPB local group. As of today (12<sup>th</sup> January) I am up to twenty-one species including those Tawny Owls that I have heard twice close by, and not forgetting that Sparrowhawk from the 8<sup>th</sup> January 2023. My initial visit of the year to Forster Park yielded nineteen species, I hope for more when I lead the community annual RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch around the park in a few weeks. My main goal though is to do my best to locate and monitor Chaffinches and Greenfinches that may yet lurk in and around Hither Green Cemetery.

# Appendices

## APPENDIX i: Lewisham sites identified as possible bird habitat

Site	Sector	Site	Sector
Blackheath	Central East	Pepys Park	North
Gilmore Road Park **	Central East	Sayes Court Park	North
Hither Green Triangle	Central East	St Pauls Churchyard Gardens	North
Lewisham Park	Central East	Thames Path	North
Manor House Gardens	Central East	Beckenham Place Park	Southeast
Manor Park	Central East	Burnt Ash Pond	Southeast
Mountsfield Park	Central East	Chinbrook Meadows	Southeast
Blythe Hill Fields	Central West	Corbett Estate	Southeast
Brockley and Ladywell Cemetery	Central West	Downham Fields	Southeast
Buckthorne Cutting Nature Reserve	Central West	Downham Playing Fields	Southeast
Crofton Park Railway Garden *	Central West	Forster Park	Southeast
Devonshire Road NR	Central West	Green Chain Walk (Downderry Road)	Southeast
Friendly Gardens/ Deptford Railway Meadow/ Dogs Park	Central West	Grove Park Cemetery	Southeast
Garthorne Road NR	Central West	Grove Park NR	Southeast
Hilly Fields	Central West	Hither Green Cemetery	Southeast
Horniman Gardens	Central West	Homebase Pond & Peter Pans Park	Southeast
Luxmore Gardens	Central West	Northbrook Park	Southeast
New Cross Gate Cutting	Central West	Southend Park	Southeast
Ravensbourne Park Gardens **	Central West	Whitefoot Playing Fields	Southeast
Telegraph Hill Lower Park	Central West	Albion Millennium Green	Southwest
Telegraph Hill Upper Park	Central West	Dacres Wood Nature Reserve	Southwest
Aragon Gardens	North	Hillcrest Woods	Southwest
Bridgehouse Meadows	North	Home Park	Southwest
Deptford Park	North	Mayow Park	Southwest
Eckington Gardens	North	Sydenham Wells Park	Southwest
Evelyn Green	North	Bellingham to Catford	Waterlink Way
Folkestone Gardens	North	Brookmill Park	Waterlink Way
Fordham Park	North	Catford Station - Ladywell Station	Waterlink Way
Lower Pepys Park	North	Sainsburys to Bellingham	Waterlink Way
Margaret McMillan Park	North	Wildcat Wilderness **	Waterlink Way

\*Only surveyed at initial visit as deemed not worth future visits

\*\*Never surveyed



## Useful Links

### Nature Reserves in Lewisham

Buckthorne Nature Reserve

<https://www.fourthreserve.org.uk>

Dacres Wood Nature Reserve

<https://lewisham.gov.uk/inmyarea/openspaces/nature-reserves/dacres-wood-nature-reserve>

Devonshire Road Nature Reserve

<https://www.devonshireroadnaturereserve.org/>

Garthorne Road Nature Reserve

<https://garthorneroadnaturereserve.com/>

Grove Park Nature Reserve

<https://lewisham.gov.uk/inmyarea/openspaces/nature-reserves/grove-park-nature-reserve>

Hither Green Triangle

<https://lewisham.gov.uk/inmyarea/openspaces/nature-reserves/hither-green-triangle>

New Cross Cutting:

<https://www.wildlondon.org.uk/nature-reserves/restricted-access-new-cross-gate-cutting>

### Friends Groups

Beckenham Place Park

<http://beckenhamplaceparkfriends.org.uk/>

Brockley & Ladywell Cemetery

<https://www.foblc.org.uk/>

Brookmill Park

<https://brookmillpark.deptfordcreek.net/>

Forster Park

<http://forsterparkfriends.org/>

### Other

Lewisham Swifts

<https://www.facebook.com/LewishamSwifts/>

Waterlink Way

<https://studylib.net/doc/7345464/waterlink-way-bird-leaflet>

RSPB Local Groups

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/community-and-advice/local-groups/>

London Wildlife Trust

<https://www.wildlondon.org.uk/>