

Friends of Ilkley Moor

Bird survey report

2025

Iain Manfield

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With contributions from Nick Hunt and Steve Parkes

Introduction and Background

Ilkley Moor has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of the range of upland vegetation types present. These habitats support a diverse moorland breeding-bird assemblage. In addition, the Moor is popular with people including walkers, cyclists, runners and dog walkers. The Moor also provides ecosystem services such as carbon capture and storage as well as affecting the rate of rainwater running off the Moor.

The Moor was included as part of the designation of the South Pennine Moors as nationally important habitats, particularly for upland birds, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). The South Pennine Moors SSSI comprises moorland stretching from Ilkley in the north to the Peak District in the south. These moorlands contain diverse and extensive examples of upland wildlife and vegetation communities, including blanket bog, mires, wet and dry heaths as well as acidic grassland. Ilkley Moor also includes various woodland types at lower levels. In 2025 Ilkley Moor along with 7 other sites in the district were designated as the Bradford Pennine Gateway National Nature Reserve. The National Nature Reserve (NNR) forms part of the King's Series, a national initiative to protect and celebrate the natural heritage of the United Kingdom, and Natural England's commitment to enhancing biodiversity and access to nature for communities.

Sadly, the UK is acknowledged to be one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

The moor is owned and managed by Bradford Metropolitan District Council. The council's key working partners are the Friends of Ilkley Moor and Moors for the Future. In recent years they have worked together to improve the resilience of the Moor to climate change principally through gully blocking and planting sphagnum. Over time it's hoped that this will enhance ecosystems and biodiversity.

It is hoped that this report will help support further initiatives to reduce disturbance from dog walkers and mountain bikers. It's hoped improved signage, designated routes, enforcement and education will support the return of a more diverse and healthier environment for fauna and flora

To better understand the current environmental health of the moor and identify trends in that health, an annual survey of breeding bird numbers would contribute to that understanding.

Previous survey information is available in one-off surveys from the JNCC in 1991 and the Bradford Ornithology Group in 2018 providing valuable information on the species using the higher areas of moorland. In addition there are birdwatching records held by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and locally by the Wharfedale Naturalists Society. There are however no data with systematic coverage of the whole area of the Moor and all habitat types.

A systematic survey of Ilkley Moor, focussing on the birds of the whole Moor was therefore required. With an aim to repeat this survey, providing year-on-year analysis of trends.

In 2025 members of The Friends of Ilkley Moor in collaboration with members of Wharfedale Naturalists Society designed a survey and carried out a count of breeding birds on Ilkley Moor. Our new contribution is to also cover the lower levels of the Moor include the woodland adjacent to the town for a more comprehensive audit of the bird-life supported by the Moor.

For the surveys we aimed to team up an experienced birdwatcher with a learner to improve their identification skills. We also added a birdwatching walk on the Moor to the summer programme of activities offered by the Friends of Ilkley Moor and the Wharfedale Naturalists Society, to improve public appreciation of bird diversity on the Moor.

The 2025 survey results described here will act as a baseline for comparison with future annual surveys. Any identified trends will help to inform areas potentially needing support or the impact of actions previously completed. This insight will help with future decision making with regard to management, conservation and improvement of the moor.

Iain Manfield and Steve Parkes.

1. Survey design

This survey was initiated and coordinated by Nick Hunt, FoIM. It was designed by Iain Manfield, Steve Westerman, Phil Galtry, Keith Allen and Nick Hunt.

The survey design was modelled on a format used nationally by the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) for their Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). The BBS covers ~4000 kilometre squares across the country and across all habitats and has been running for 20+ years. Each km square is surveyed along two routes (transects) across the square. Each transect is divided into five 200 metre segments allowing correlation of birds with differences in habitat within the square.

In practice, routes in urban areas follow roads, while in rural areas footpaths provide clear existing routes so the transect routes will not be perfectly straight lines across the landscape.

On Ilkley Moor we took advantage of the number of footpaths running more-or-less east-west and north-south. We devised transect routes of 2km length crossing two 1 km squares, therefore covering the same distance as used by the BTO BBS survey. We decided not to use a design with 2x 1km transects within each km square as there were not always existing footpaths for a second transect within a square and we felt that it was inappropriate to risk being seen to encourage moving off paths especially during bird breeding season.

In our survey strategy there are however multiple routes in some km squares, providing more comprehensive coverage. Transects 2 and 3 are approximately perpendicular in SE1245; transects 4 and 5 are loosely parallel in SE1146, and SE1246; transects 4 and 5 then cross transect 3 in SE1246; 6 and 7 are parallel in both SE0946 and SE1046. This strategy took almost full advantage of the available existing paths across the moor and provided coverage of all OS km squares containing significant areas of the Moor.

Parallel routes are a significant distance apart and also in altitude, reducing risk of birds being double-counted from different transects. Indeed, in woodland areas, multiple routes are required for good survey coverage as the vegetation would obscure birds being seen more than a few metres from the path.

Survey visits were performed between mid-April and mid-June when birds would start breeding activity and therefore be more readily detectable by song as well as visibly. Over-wintering birds will largely have moved away and there will be little post-breeding movement into the area by the end of the survey period. Three visits were done for each transect. This is more than the two required by the BTO BBS as we wanted to get better coverage.

Survey visits were done in early morning while birds are singing most loudly and before disturbance from other people using the Moor. Each survey was performed by two people, an experienced birder with a learner to add a training component to the collection of bird data.

2. Overview of survey results

Nine transect routes were surveyed covering 10 of the 11 km grid squares containing parts of Ilkley Moor, with only a narrow strip of moor west of Crawshaw Moss not covered. All transects were surveyed with the requested three visits. Therefore, this equivalent survey effort allows robust comparison of species number and abundance between transects and km squares.

For this report, records were collated and allocated to a km grid square, for ease of comparison with a map of the Moor and people's familiarity with the habitats of the Moor. For each km square, the highest count for each species across the three visits was then used as a measure of the maximum abundance. N.B. this is not the *sum* of all counts.

Over all transects and visits, 66 species were recorded comprising 61 species which were confidently identified with an additional 5 species less-confidently identified, but which can be considered “probable”.

In total, around 1500 individual birds were recorded.

The abundance of each species is shown in **Table 1** and species ranked by abundance. The totals for Golden plover and Woodpigeon are, in a sense, inflated, due to larger groups of birds early and late in the season. To better describe the number of breeding birds on the Moor, excluding these individuals gives a Top 3 set of breeding birds.

Meadow pipit, Red grouse and Willow warbler all showed an abundance >100 birds.

These data are the first bird survey of all areas of Ilkley Moor, providing the required benchmark to assess changes in abundance of bird species over time and with changes in habitat management and climate.

We are immensely grateful to all who contributed to this project especially the people listed below who collected the survey data. Thank you.

transect route		
1	Paddy Sturman	Steve King
2	James O’Leary	Becky
3	Steve Amos	Jude Harmon
4	Anthony Betts	Susan Betts
5	Iain Manfield	Deb White
6	Steve Westerman	Dave Martin
7	Mark Overfield	
8	Jon Drew	Nick Hunt
9	Steve Westerman	Dave Martin

Species	rank	count	Species	rank	count
Meadow pipit	1	315	Buzzard	34	5
Golden plover	2	221 *	Blackcap	35	4
Woodpigeon	3	143 *	Wheatear	36	4
Red grouse	4	117	Garden warbler	37	3
Willow warbler	5	101	Linnet	38	3
Skylark	6	49	Raven	39	3
Curlew	7	47	Bullfinch	40	2
Carrion crow	8	41	Great black-backed gull	41	2
Wren	9	35	Great tit	42	2
Stonechat	10	32	Herring gull	43	2
Mallard	11	28	Long-tailed tit	44	2
Greylag goose	12	27	Marsh harrier ?	45	2
Blackbird	13	24	Moorhen	46	2
Jackdaw	14	18	Redpoll	47	2
Lesser black-backed gull	15	18	Ring ouzel ?	48	2
Magpie	16	17	Starling	49	2
Robin	17	17	Swallow	50	2
Siskin	18	16	Tree pipit ?	51	2
Red kite	19	13	Tufted duck	52	2
Pheasant	20	12	Coal tit	53	1
Chaffinch	21	11	Crossbill	54	1
Reed bunting	22	11	Goldcrest	55	1
Swift	23	11	Jay	56	1
Cuckoo	24	10	Kestrel	57	1
Chiffchaff	25	9	Lesser whitethroat ?	58	1
Common gull	26	9	Nuthatch	59	1
Song thrush	27	8	Rook	60	1
Feral pigeon	28	7	Sand martin	61	1
Redshank	29	7	Sedge warbler	62	1
Black-headed gull	30	6	Snipe	63	1
Duncock	31	6	Stock dove	64	1
Goldfinch	32	6	Whitethroat	65	1
Blue tit	33	5	partridge sp.	66	1

Table 1. Ranked abundance of each species recorded. The highest counts of each species on each km square were summed to give the values shown, as used by the BTO Breeding Bird Survey. N.B. the values shown are not the sum of all records and therefore there is no double-counting. Counts for Golden plover and Woodpigeon are starred as they include numbers for large groups - 200 migrating birds for GP from an early visit and 55 birds for WP, post-breeding groups late in the recording season. Species with less-confident identification are indicated by ? or sp.

grid square	Example location	transect no. (section nos.)	number of species	count of individuals
SE1346	Cow and calf	8 (1-5)	6	33
SE1145	Cairn 402 trig point	2 (1-5)	7	51
SE1345	Lanshaw Lass stone	8 (6-10)	7	24
SE1146	Badger Stone	9 (1-3)	7	42
SE1045	Whetstone Gate	1 (6-10)	12	38
SE0946	Black Buck Hole	9 (9-10)	12	52
SE1245	Lanshaw Lad	3 (6-10)	13	61
SE1245	Lanshaw Lad	2 (6-10)	14	67
SE1246	Ilkley Crag	4 (6-10)	14	46
SE1046	Silver Well Cottage	9 (4-8)	14	59
SE1046	Silver Well Cottage	6 (6-10)	15	69
SE1146	East of Keighley Road	4 (1-5)	17	100
SE0946	Black Buck Hole	6 (1-5)	21	108
SE0945	East Buck Stones	1 (1-5)	22	60
SE1046	above Panorama Rocks	7 (6-10)	22	74
SE1146	East of Keighley Road	5 (1-5)	24	77
SE1246	From Tarn, heading uphill	3 (1-5)	26	139
SE1246	Below Rocky Valley	5 (6-10)	30	106
SE0946	above Hebers Ghyll	7 (1-5)	30	104

Table 2. Species count in each km square of Ilkley Moor. The table shows the number of species recorded from each km square and the sum of the peak counts for each species. An example location is given for each km square as a more familiar landmark for orientation of people familiar with the Moor. The table is ranked by number of species, with moorland habitat giving fewer species but more species in areas with woodland habitat.

3. Species groups

This section summarises the survey data for each species recorded, including number and locations. Some assessment of likely breeding is made, although no attempt was made to systematically collect breeding evidence data. Species are roughly grouped in families or shared habitat use and discussed in roughly taxonomic order.

Geese, ducks, Moorhen

Mallard was recorded most clearly at the Tarn with a peak count of 21 birds, unsurprisingly as this is the largest body of water on the Moor. Single records of 1-3 birds in other squares hint at use of less obvious areas of the Moor.

Moorhen, as with Mallard, was recorded from the Tarn.

Tufted duck was recorded in one square, perhaps having wandered from the reservoir adjacent to Hebers Ghyll.

Greylag goose was recorded in all visits from a square at the top of the Moor along with a few single-figure records sporadically around higher-level areas. **Canada goose** was not recorded but they are seen on moorland elsewhere in the Dales. Both goose species are possible breeders on the Moor.

Birds of prey

Red kite was recorded over all types of habitat usually as single birds but four recorded on one visit. **Buzzards** were recorded only as single birds again widely distributed. There was only a single **Kestrel** record.

A possible **Marsh harrier** was recorded once. They have been recorded on nearby moors and above Grassington.

Game birds

Unsurprisingly, **Red grouse** were recorded widely across the top of the Moor and also at mid-levels, but not at lower levels. Records, often just into double figures, from April, May and June support breeding birds specialised for this upland habitat.

Pheasant were recorded as only 1-2 birds throughout the survey in only one square and again as 1-3 birds sporadically in other squares.

A partridge was reported but from a brief view not identified as **Red-legged partridge** or **Grey partridge**.

Waders

Curlew were recorded across the higher-level areas of the Moor. Their distinctive, far-carrying song in display flight was audible and birds visible from areas well below their territories. This

display behaviour and records throughout the survey season support the conclusion of them breeding on the Moor.

A large group of **Golden plover** were recorded in April. They often linger around the Dales, before migrating further north, well into spring, well after other wader species are displaying for mates and territory. Other records in April of single-figure number of birds may represent other lingering birds. However, the top of the Moor is suitable habitat for breeding Golden plover and they can become difficult to find so breeding was possible.

Redshank was recorded three times in squares with wetter areas. They are often seen feeding around the margins of pools.

There was a single **Snipe** record of a single bird. They can be easily detected with their drumming display flights or calls from the top of fences and walls. Perhaps 2025 as a dry year was not good for them.

No **Lapwing** were recorded but the Moor perhaps does not contain habitat as they are typically seen elsewhere in the Dales in semi-improved grassland with grazing and livestock bedding material spread over the fields. Similarly, **Oystercatcher** was not recorded, again preferring close-grazed areas and river-bank shingle (with the roof of Ilkley tennis club apparently providing equivalent habitat!).

Changes to habitat management on the Moor to make it wetter will likely benefit all of the wader species recorded.

Gulls

There were just a few records of single **Black-headed gulls**. They breed at Barden upper reservoir near Skipton in a colony of hundreds of birds so perhaps a few more might have been expected.

There were a few records of **Lesser black-backed gull** but also of **Herring gull** and **Great black-backed gulls**. These large gulls take a few years to mature so perhaps roam widely during breeding season before becoming adults.

A few records of single **Common gull** will be birds lingering from winter. There will sometimes be hundreds of Common gull in late winter and early spring on fields in the Dales after farmers have spread slurry over fields.

Pigeons

Woodpigeon was recorded from wooded areas throughout the survey. The abundance number is inflated by some counts of tens of birds in June, perhaps when feeding on bilberries.

Feral pigeon was recorded on the Cow and Calf in each visit, neatly illustrating its ancestry from Rock dove now only found in Britain in its pure form away from urban areas in the Hebrides.

A single **Stock dove** was recorded once. **Collared dove** was not recorded at all. Numbers of Collared doves have dropped in recent years but are regularly seen in Grassington.

Cuckoo

Cuckoo was another bird contributing to the spring soundscape of the Moor with its far-carrying eponymous song. We saw singing Cuckoos being mobbed by Meadow pipits. They know what the Cuckoo is up to, and yet the Cuckoo still gets its eggs into Meadow pipit nests and have them do the work of bringing up the Cuckoo chick.

Hirundines and Swift

There were just two records of **Swallow** and only one of **Sand Martin** but no **House Martin** records. Sand martin nest in sandy banks along rivers (e.g. at Conistone) and House martin nest under building eaves. Few records from the Moor might not be a surprise therefore but equally the Moor might provide insect resources for them.

Swift, often lumped with hirundines due to similar appearance and feeding behaviour, was recorded from three km squares and it may also have been expected to use the Moor for insect hunting.

“Little brown jobs” - Meadow pipit, Skylark, Wren, Dunnock

It feels it doesn't do justice to **Meadow pipit** to cover the most abundant bird in the middle of this list of birds. It was widely present across the heather moor. Records of multiple birds at every survey visit through spring supports that Meadow pipits were breeding on the Moor. Lower down, it was interesting walking along a survey route to move from woodland, thinning to scrub and to rocky heathland and then see and hear Meadow pipit as the habitat changed to suit them. Although we haven't used the data to 200m resolution in this report, the information is now available for more detailed correlation of bird presence with habitat types.

Skylark, looking similar to Meadow pipit, was recorded at many fewer sites, but was again recorded in each survey visit to one km square providing evidence of likely breeding.

Wren is an under-rated bird with a distribution across almost all of Britain indicating an adaptability exceeding other species. On the Moor, Wren was recorded in all survey visits in 5 km squares, with woodland habitat. It was especially abundant around the Tarn. It's loud and frequent song making it more effectively recorded than many other species. A small number of birds were recorded on a square on the upper Moor, speaking to that adaptability.

Dunnock was recorded just 6 times, perhaps preferring more grassy areas than present much on the moor. It also has a quieter song and skulks around at ground level so may have been under-recorded.

Thrushes and chats

Blackbird was the most common thrush followed by **Song thrush**, both in woodland areas. Surprisingly no **Mistle thrush** was recorded, although there is suitable habitat and it sings from tree-tops making it detectable.

There was a record of possible **Ring ouzel**, for two birds in flight at the top of the Moor. This was probably a regular bird of Ilkley Moor in the past. However, climate change is causing distributions to move north and to higher altitude. They may be stopping off on migration using the moor to refuel and the Moor is therefore still a valuable resource for the birds. Other people will have records of Ring ouzels on the Moor, historical and from visits outside of our survey.

There were no **Redwing** or **Fieldfare** records - species over-wintering in Britain but breeding in Scandinavia and into eastern Europe and Russia. The absence of these birds supports that the birds we recorded of other species are more likely breeding on the Moor.

Robin was recorded throughout the survey in two km squares in woodland.

Stonechat was recorded widely in the higher areas of the moor but only in all survey visits on one square. They often perch very visibly on bracken or thistles, so they are often easy to find.

Wheatear was recorded just three times for 1-2 birds over different squares so there is not good evidence of breeding for this species from survey data.

Warblers

Willow warbler was very abundant, with the 5th highest count of individuals, but 3rd highest for breeding individuals. Their song was a near constant accompaniment on surveys at lower levels of the Moor. It was especially common in areas of scrubby trees and willows.

The similar-looking but very different sounding **Chiffchaff** was less common than Willow warbler. These are two very interesting species for this survey as they are species affected by climate change with distributions moving north over time. Surveys of the Moor in additional years may indicate this change. However, local effects with maturation of the woodland may change suitability for Willow warbler.

Blackcap and **Garden warbler** were reported from areas of woodland. The songs of these birds are similar but photos of Garden warbler confirm this identification. There were just single records of **Whitethroat**, **Lesser whitethroat** and **Sedge warbler** during the surveys. Additional sightings of singing Whitethroat outside surveys supports a breeding attempt for this species.

There was a single record for **Goldcrest**. This may under-represent abundance as the song of this very small bird is at frequencies above the audible range for older men so may be less detectable by sound. Use of the Merlin bird identification app aids picking up when Goldcrest are present. Even just a few conifers can be enough habitat for a Goldcrest territory.

Tits

Blue tit was recorded throughout the survey from a single square of woodland habitat which also had the only **Long-tailed tit** records. **Great tit** was recorded only twice and **Coal tit** just once.

With large area of woodland, more of these species might have been expected. There will be many people in the town with bird feeders in their gardens which may affect numbers of these species on the moor.

Woodpeckers, Nuthatch, Treecreeper

A single **Nuthatch** was recorded from a transect near Panorama Rocks at the top of the town with mature trees on the other side of the road from the moor.

No **Treecreeper** or **Great spotted woodpecker** were recorded, surprisingly given the amount of woodland on the Moor and adjacent. Treecreeper can be hard to spot crawling up tree trunks. It is well-camouflaged brown above but the underside is strikingly bright white. Drumming by Great spotted woodpeckers makes them readily detectable if present.

Out of taxonomic sequence, but for context to complete the set of woodland specialists, **Goldcrest** was recorded just once, from an area of conifers at the top of the Moor and **Jay** was recorded from the area around the Tarn.

Corvids

Carrion crow was the most abundant corvid, recorded in five squares of woodland between Spicey Gill towards the Cow and Calf and also around the Tarn. Records of 1-4 birds in each survey visit support breeding for this species. **Magpie** records were similar to Carrion crow - few birds in the same habitat and most of the same squares. In contrast, **Jackdaw** records were more one-off records of larger numbers of birds in flight moving between the town and the Moor.

There was a single record of **Rook**. There were also records of a single **Jay** from around the Tarn.

There were just three records for **Raven**, from one of the highest parts of the Moor and from one of the lowest parts of the Moor, reflecting the behaviour of Ravens to range widely. Flying high the tail shape quoted as an ID feature may not always be visible, so identification from Carrion crow or Rook becomes less confident. The ringing *glongck* calls (that's how I hear it) are often the first sign of a Raven overhead.

Finches

Siskin was the most abundant finch, recorded in diverse habitats with highest counts high on the Moor but also 1-2 birds over deciduous woodland at lower levels. No square had records on each survey visit but counts of small numbers of birds from various squares in April, May and June supports that they are breeding somewhere on the Moor.

Chaffinch records were also widely-distributed and throughout the survey period supporting breeding on the Moor. It was recorded mainly at low level in woodland, with records in four survey visits to woodland above the Tarn.

Bullfinch was recorded in just one square of woodland near Spicey Gill and in four survey visits. With male and female birds recorded in suitable habitat, this is good evidence of probable breeding. **Goldfinch** was recorded in similar habitat to Bullfinch but less consistently through the survey period so it is a possible breeder.

There were just three records of **Linnet** and single records for **Crossbill** and **Redpoll**, all of 1-2 birds. These are more habitat specialists than many other species so will be at low abundance given the habitats of the Moor. They have less distinctive and quieter song than many other birds

so may be harder to detect and less familiar for confident identification. Detection and identification of finches is one area where use of the Merlin app was useful for surveyors.

Greenfinch was not recorded, but again there is suitable woodland and scrub habitat for them.

Reed bunting

Reed bunting didn't get the memo about the habitat it should use, instead being found in a wider range of habitats, including bracken, usually with marshy areas nearby (but not necessarily with reeds). Records were usually of single birds, at opposite ends of the Moor including at Backstone Beck, near the Cow and Calf.

No **Yellowhammer** were recorded but this is a bird more usually seen around agricultural areas singing from hedge tops e.g. around Eccup reservoir.

Birds not recorded (but which might be expected)

Of course there are many species we didn't record, but using local knowledge and understanding of the habitats of the Moor, we can make some predictions of species we might expect to see. This does not aim to be an exhaustive list, rather aiming to indicate that there are likely other species present at low abundance and also, importantly, nocturnal birds we missed with a day-time survey strategy. Long-term birders of Ilkley Moor will also be aware of birds which have been lost from the Moor, and which are unlikely to return as breeders, e.g. **Twite**.

With species breeding as a single pair in a small area of the Moor, it is possible we miss some. For other surveys, we could pick up information from social media such as WhatsApp groups or casual records to build a more complete narrative of the birds of the Moor.

The following species were not recorded and are mentioned in the appropriate species group section above; **Canada goose, Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Collared dove, House martin, Mistle thrush, Treecreeper, Great spotted woodpecker and Greenfinch**.

Among raptors, Sparrowhawk and Merlin were not recorded. With lots of bird feeders in town there will be lots of small bird prey available for **Sparrowhawks**. The high, gliding flight may make confident identification tricky, but silhouette and flap-flap-glide behaviour allows confident distinction from the behaviour of other raptors, without clear views of plumage. **Merlin** is a bird of upland where Meadow pipit is a main prey item and our survey has shown there are lots of them. They breed at low density so surveyors would need to be lucky to see one, with a fast-and-low hunting strategy compounding the identification challenge. **Peregrine falcons** are nesting on buildings in urban areas around the moor so may also hunt over the Moor in addition to hunting pigeons closer to home.

No wagtails were recorded but there is suitable habitat for at least one of the species. **Grey wagtail** feed and breed along rocky streams. There is suitable habitat in streams running down various ghylls but vegetation would likely obscure detection. **Pied wagtail** are often seen in areas of grazed grassland and even car parks. **Yellow wagtail** is less likely to be recorded.

No **Grey herons** were recorded. They are often seen hunting frogs beside ponds or even in ditches and any wet area so feeding areas are available on the Moor. Breeding occurs in traditional tree-top heronries but they are strong fliers to travel between feeding and breeding areas. **Little egret** is possible as egrets become more common around the Dales.

There is lots of good woodland edge habitat for **Spotted flycatcher**. However the challenges of trans-Saharan migration and reduced insect numbers on breeding habitat is affecting the numbers we record in the Dales. The same issues affect **Redstart**, **Wood warbler** and **Pied flycatcher**. Some of these species are reported in a local birding WhatsApp group so appropriate habitat management perhaps including nest-box provision could support these species.

With a survey focussed on birds most active in daylight we of course did not record any nocturnal or crepuscular (dusk active) birds. Any of the owl species are possible on Ilkley Moor i.e. **Barn owl**, **Tawny owl**, **Short-eared owl**, **Long-eared owl** and **Little owl**. Other species more active in the evening include **Woodcock**, **Nightjar** and **Grasshopper warbler** are possible breeding birds on or adjacent to the Moor. Evening surveys would be required to record presence of these species. Another option becoming more widely used is passive acoustic monitoring, using recording devices left out in suitable habitat for extended periods to record bird song and calls, programmed to start recording at specific times, e.g. late evening.

Discussion

Summary of 2025 activity

Our 2025 survey reported 60+ bird species on Ilkley Moor. Of these 40+ species are breeding on the Moor or possible breeding, with other species breeding nearby and using the Moor for feeding.

We don't claim to have surveyed all of the Moor but most km squares have been surveyed, many from multiple routes. We have taken advantage of a substantial proportion of the footpaths over the Moor, without going off paths and risking disturbance of breeding birds. Each route was surveyed the requested three times in spring, allowing comparison of number and diversity of birds between routes. We don't claim to have found all the birds of the Moor, which would have required more effort, at risk of people not wanting to make that commitment.

The approaches used provide a structured basis for systematically collecting data about the birds of the Moor.

Comparison with other survey data

To identify trends in bird abundance requires data over many years. We have information from JNCC for 1991 and from the Bradford Ornithology Group from 2018, both surveying the upper moorland areas of the Moor only.

The JNCC report shows the importance of the Moor for Curlew, Meadow pipit and Red grouse which we also see in our results and was reported by BOG.

Ring ouzel were not definitively recorded in our survey, but are reported on social media, perhaps birds passing through to higher areas of moorland elsewhere. On the other hand, Twite have been lost from the Moor and are barely retaining a presence anywhere in the south Pennines.

More encouragingly, Golden plover are still present on the Moor but in lower numbers than reported in 1991, using data collected in 1990. The BOG survey reported a number of Golden plover pairs including young birds. Redshank and Snipe were recorded in our survey as they were by BOG. There are therefore a number of species already using the Moor which might benefit from changes in local management.

Wider context

Ilkley Moor is not an isolated, separate part of the landscape, comprising just one part of Rombalds Moor. More broadly, the Moor is part of similar habitat across the southern Pennines, with each land-owner having their own management strategies.

Local management of the Moor will affect bird numbers through e.g. re-wetting parts of the Moor and also habitat succession as trees grow on the Moor. How people use the Moor for recreational activities will also affect wildlife.

Locally, conservation work in other areas may affect the Moor. At the Denton Estate work "to deliver nature recovery at scale" is likely to have effects on the birds of Ilkley Moor, building larger populations of breeding birds in the area. Systematic surveys of birds, butterflies, and other

wildlife, have been run on the Denton Estate allowing them to determine the effects of different management approaches.

The Yorkshire Dales National Park works in many ways with land-owners and farmers to carry out conservation work, including the Farming in Protected Landscapes program and the recently-announced Wildlife-rich Habitat fund.

These local habitat connections recall ideas discussed in the “Making Space for Nature” report from 2010, work led by Professor Sir John Lawton. Distilling a 119-page report to a short statement, “more, bigger, better and connected” outlines aspirations for a “more coherent and resilient ecological network”. Subsequently, this has been described as the Lawton principles.

In a little more detail, the report gives five principles, copied below. We will each have a view on how these might applied at different scales, in our gardens to the management of Ilkley Moor and at larger scales.

1. Improve the quality of current sites by better habitat management.
2. Increase the size of current wildlife sites.
3. Enhance connections between, or join up, sites, either through physical corridors, or through ‘stepping stones’.
4. Create new sites.
5. Reduce the pressures on wildlife by improving the wider environment, including through buffering wildlife sites.

There are also global and national issues affecting the Moor.

The effects of climate change are changing bird distributions. One effect is to move the range of upland birds to altitudes not present on the Moor. This is likely one reason for changing distribution of Ring ouzel. Someone may have their own “patch birding” records charting changing distribution of Chiffchaff and Willow warbler on the Moor. Amongst national issues is the RSPB advice not to feed birds during breeding season and their decision not to sell bird food and feeders in this period, hoping to reduce disease amongst birds - “feed seasonally, feed safely”. This will affect the birds of the Moor given the proximity of Moor and the town and movement of birds between these areas.

Survey 2026

We are running the survey again in 2026. Early results support the importance of the Moor for Curlew, Meadow pipit, Red grouse and Willow warbler we saw in 2025. We have also filled gaps for some species we expected to find but missed last year, allowing us to build a more complete picture of the breeding birds of Moor.

Sources

Friends of Ilkley Moor

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Bradford Council

Ilkley Moor management plan

<https://www.bradford.gov.uk/media/5953/ilkley-moor-management-plan.pdf>

Denton Reserve

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Moors for the Future

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

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RSPB

[Our latest guidance on what and when to feed garden birds: Feed Safely, Feed Seasonally](#)

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/news/how-to-help-garden-birds>

Yorkshire Dales National Park

<https://www.yorkshiredales.org.uk/about/wildlife/>

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