

FACE

Fleet and Crookham
Environment **is Threatened**



YET MORE RARE BIRDS IN THE HART VALLEY

The FACE-IT Group are continuing to monitor the exceptional biodiversity in the Hart Valley during the early summer.



Unseasonably wet weather seems to have encouraged more rare species into the Hart Valley following the extraordinary sightings of the Spring. The first ever Long-eared Owl was found in dense scrub along the River Hart in late June, (the fifth species of owl to be recorded in the Hart valley). The bird was located in the centre of an extensive area of rough meadows left uncut, probably because of the wet weather, and no doubt rich in mammal prey.



Later on the same day, a new species for the valley, a Nightjar was watched at dusk, in fine drizzle, quartering the same meadows in search of moths. Richard Hellier, the FACE-IT Environmental Spokesman thought it was likely this female was breeding on the heathlands across the town but was forced to the valley in search of a richer source of moths for its young.

This very rare sighting in the Hart Valley and around Crookham Village follows previous records of Dartford Warbler and

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Woodlark at Grove Farm. These sightings emphasise the importance of the area to birds making the area as valuable as the designated areas to the east of Fleet.

Impressive numbers of yellowhammers are present on the farmland between Crookham Village and the railway line at the top of Hitches Lane, with up to 12 breeding pairs along the River Hart. This very high density may be of national significance as this red listed Bird of Conservation Concern is declining fast across the country. One reason for positive news is the interesting relationship between the farmland and our gardens particularly around Hitches Lane and Pilcot. Although the farmland has good nesting habitat for the bird, with lots of hedgerows, it offers few sources of seed between January and June, known as the ‘hunger gap’. Many local people put seed down on their back lawns for yellowhammers and this makes all the difference to the bird’s chances of survival. Young have already been seen in a Hitches Lane garden.

Up to 20 pairs of skylarks are breeding in the farmland and rough open ground around Crookham Village and the Hart valley. Like with the yellowhammer, this is a high density and currently viable population but it is vulnerable to development and land use changes. For example 3 pairs are nesting on the rough field opposite the Leisure Centre, a site that is likely to be lost.

‘It’s fantastic to watch barn owls and bats flying along through the fields and hedges along the River Hart at dusk. There is a place you can stand and watch these superb, ghostly birds all less than a mile from the edge of Fleet. The other pleasure of this spot is the dark sky. The ‘Tump’ at Grove Farm and Fleet’s dense canopy of scots pine and oak cloak much of the town’s street lighting. Extending development out into the open Hart Valley would have a major negative impact on this surprisingly tranquil and unspoiled spot. Experiences like this highlight the superb natural quality of the area in which we live.’, said Richard Hellier of FACE-IT.

The new Edenbrook Country Park Nature Reserve is also attracting more wildlife to the area but there are some concerns about the potential impact when it is opened to public use. John Clark (Hampshire Bird Recorder 1993-2010) said, ‘Edenbrook Nature

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Reserve and the surrounding farmlands have already proved to be a magnet for a large variety of birds, with approaching 120 species found in the last three years. Many of these, such as Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting, Skylark and Lapwing, are declining in the wider countryside, so it is good to find that they are thriving at Edenbrook. The mosaic of mature hedgerows and uncut meadows provide suitable, undisturbed habitat for these and many other birds. The new wetlands and reedbeds have also proved attractive to a variety of breeding, wintering and migrant birds including recently a drake Garganey, a rare duck with a national population of fewer than 100 pairs. There have also been frequent visits from up to eight Little Egrets, which until 15 years ago was a very rare visitor to the UK. The area of reeds around the hide is a particularly attractive habitat and it is to be hoped that the paths to the hide will be suitably screened to prevent disturbance of the reedbeds by people and their dogs. People should keep to the paths and take great care to control their dogs in this special area. Unfortunately, I have seen some instances of dogs straying into the ponds and am very concerned that they could also go into the reedbeds.'

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