

Whinchat on the Long Mynd, Shropshire, and in Shropshire

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The County of Shropshire is in the English West Midlands, adjacent to Wales. The Long Mynd is largely a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) owned by the National Trust. It is a heather moorland plateau, largely over 400m, with a high point of 516m. Streams have cut several steep sided valleys into the plateau. The vegetation is a mixture of varying proportions of heather and bracken, or bracken with bracken litter understorey. The total area is about 24 km², with the plateau occupying almost half that.

The Long Mynd Breeding Bird Project carried out a full survey between 1994 and 1998, and estimated a population of 110 – 130 breeding pairs of the whinchat (SMITH 2003). A repeat survey in 2006-08 found 59 – 65, and estimated a population of around 70 breeding pairs, a decline of about 40% (SMITH in prep.). All pairs on both surveys were found in the upper reaches of the steep sided valleys, with no territories on the flat open moorland, although some pairs did take fledged young up onto the moor to feed.

The BTO organise a national Breeding Bird Survey. It involves walking two 1 kilometre transects, twice in each breeding season. A transect in Callow Hollow, one of the steep sided valleys on Long Mynd, is the only BBS to regularly record Whinchat in Shropshire. Counts from 1994 onwards through to the late 2000s were fairly consistent, suggesting a population of around 7 pairs, but this fell to 6 in 2010 – 12, 5 in 2013 and only 4 in 2014 and subsequently. This decline has occurred in prime habitat, which does not appear to have changed during 23 years.

During the 1994-98 project, the habitat occupied by Whinchats was recorded. A total of

254 observations were made over the five years, and bracken was present in every single recorded habitat. Correlation with the distribution of the main habitats, comprising 16 different vegetation mixes, showed that 38% of territories were in bracken with bracken litter understorey. However, this was the most widespread habitat, and the breeding density was higher where heath, rather than bracken, was the understorey, and the highest densities, twice that in bracken with bracken litter understorey, were reached where the heath understorey is less thick, and is interspersed with grass, or where heath is dominant, but it is interspersed with bracken. As the territories are all in the upper reaches of steep sided valleys, all were close to streams, and many were adjacent to flushes where springs emerge. Although the results have not yet been quantified, all territories in 2006-08 also contained bracken and wet areas.

Bracken is usually perceived as an alien invasive nuisance, and habitat management plans often attempt to eradicate it through expensive spraying. However, Whinchats are clearly wholly dependent on bracken on the Long Mynd. This is not a dependence on bracken per se, but bracken is the only tall herbaceous vegetation available.

SHROPSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY (1992) carried out a tetrad level Breeding Bird Atlas project in 1985-90. It was repeated to coincide with the BTO Atlas 2007-11, using the same methodology, again at the tetrad level, and again taking six years (2008-13) to cover all 870 tetrads in the County.

Tetrads with evidence of breeding declined by 65%, from 75 to 26. The County population was estimated at 110-275 breeding pairs in



Fig. 1: The upper reaches of Ashes Hollow, Long Mynd. Prime Whinchat habitat. Photo taken in early May, before the new bracken growth has obscured last year's dead bracken (Photo: © L. SMITH).

1990, but that was increased to around 300 pairs in the light of the 1998 estimate of the Long Mynd population. The 1985-90 Atlas listed many sites where Whinchat bred at that time, but most of them were not occupied during the 2008-13 Atlas period. Some sites where Whinchat was recorded during the Atlas period were not occupied in the later years, indicating that the population continued to decline over that period. It appears that Long Mynd is now the only site in Shropshire where Whinchat still breed regularly, with occasional records from the nearby Stiperstones (including one instance of probable breeding in 2014).

The population estimate in 2008 was around 75 breeding pairs, only one-quarter of the earlier figure. The BBS results suggest that the population has continued to decline since then.

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RSPB has initiated a national long term study on the causes of Whinchat decline, which will include the Long Mynd, and the local population monitoring project will be repeated, starting in 2017.

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Literature

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