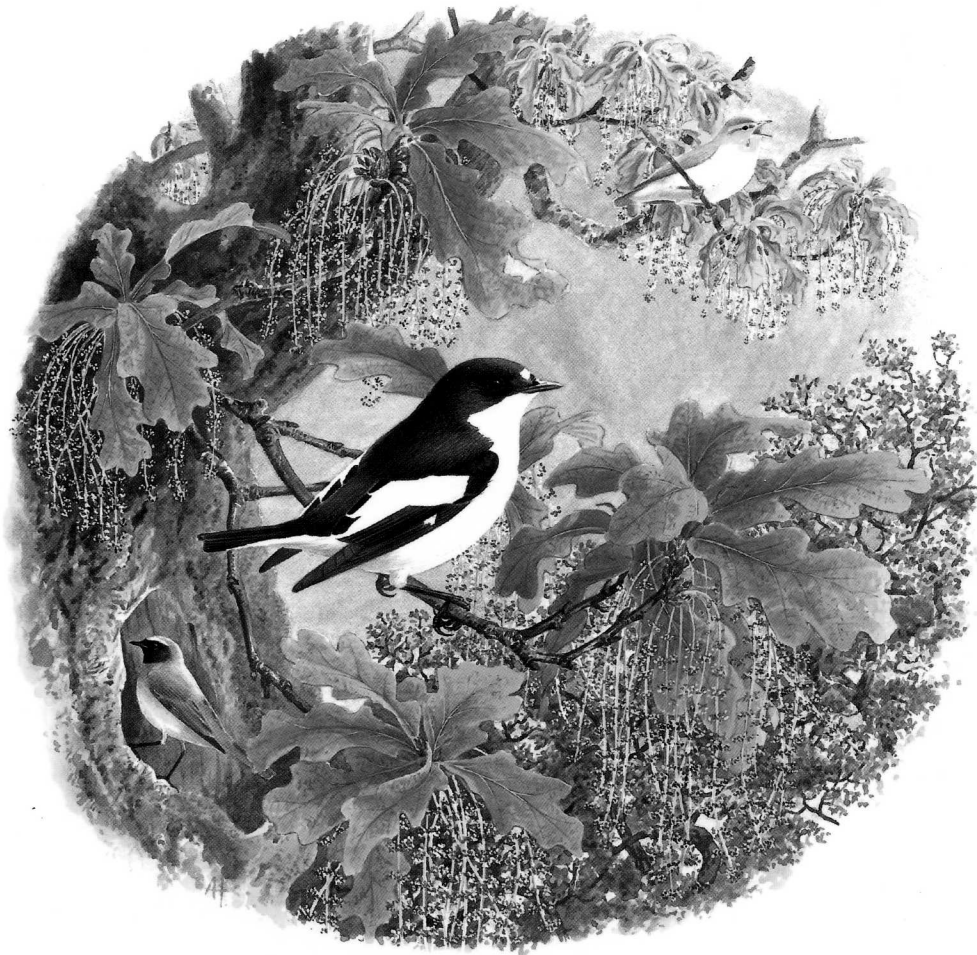


# The Birds of Radnorshire



Peter Jennings

suitable nesting places. Most nests today are in mature trees, especially conifers, but are also to be found in a few steep hillside Rowans and Hawthorns just a few metres tall. Nesting still takes place on suitable crags, often in competition with Peregrines, and on derelict upland farm buildings. Breeding takes place in every hectad in the county and since 2005 the population seems to be in the range of 170-200 pairs with probably at least 350 non-breeding birds.

Flocks of 10-40 are often seen at all times of the year. The former refuse tips at Clyro, Rhayader and Nantmel regularly attracted 30-60 birds and the Red Kite feeding station at Gigrin Farm, near Rhayader, has also produced counts of 50-100 birds. At Llanbwchlyn a flock of about 75 was seen in 1971 and one of 55 was seen in the Elan Valley on 6th February 1991. A chicken waste dump on the border with Herefordshire, near Knill, regularly attracted over 100 birds in the 1990s, with the flock loafing and roosting in the adjacent forestry at Burfa Camp. The highest count there was 162 on 10th February 1996 with 100-150 regularly counted in 1998, at least 120 on 4th January 1999 and 95 on 14th April 2000.

Ravens rarely wander far from their natal area and of the 40 ringing recoveries to and from Powys none have been of more than 100km. A nestling ringed at Kington on 19th April 1959 was found dead at Knighton on 1st April 1966 (17km N) and another ringed at Cwmystwyth in Ceredigion on 1st May 1982 was recovered north of Rhayader on 21st May 1989 (10km E).

'Dick', a pet Raven kept at Maesllwch Castle in the 19th century, died on 21st February 1855 aged 22 years.

## **Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*

Uncommon breeding bird; very common winter visitor and passage migrant.

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*Breeds in the Azores, Canary Islands, France, the British Isles and the Faeroe Islands east across most of Europe, western and central Russia east to the Central Siberian Plateau and Manchuria, north to the North Cape of Norway, south to the far north of India, northern Iran and Turkey. Winters within the breeding range and south to north-west Africa, the Mediterranean, the Himalayas, Afghanistan and the Arabian Peninsula. Introduced in South Africa, North America, southern Australia and New Zealand.*

The history of the Starling in Radnorshire is one of ups and downs as it has been over much of Britain, especially in the west and north. In the 18th century the species went into widespread decline and was unknown as a breeding bird over most of Wales, although still a common passage migrant and winter visitor from the continent. However, a resurgence started around 1830 and continued until the end of the 19th century with the recolonisation of Radnorshire probably occurring between 1860 and 1870 with numbers continuing to increase well into the 20th century. A noticeable decline started in the 1960s with another more pronounced downward trend, which was very noticeable in Radnorshire,

starting in the early to mid 1980s. Breeding numbers have declined rapidly since then and continue to do so. Similar reductions, and even regional extinctions, since about 1980 have also taken place over much of northern Europe.

Today it is a rare breeding bird in the county away from the towns with most pairs in the countryside closely associated with rough and heavily grazed commons and some mixed farms. It is absent now as a breeding bird from the Elan and Claerwen Valleys, although there were a few pairs around some of the farms and also nesting in cliff crevices until the early 1990s. It is also now absent as a nester from the far north of the county but is found in small numbers locally throughout the rest of the county, especially the lower parts of the south and east, and has been recorded as breeding in all but two of the county's 21 hectads (10-km squares) since 2004. Such is the scarcity of the species in the spring and summer that every breeding record, and post-breeding flock seen in July and August, is now noteworthy in Radnorshire.

Overall breeding numbers in the county have declined by over 80% since 1980 and this is reflected in the size of the late summer flocks that gather on the hills and commons. These flock sizes in recent years are mostly in the low tens rather than in the low hundreds. On 30th July 1975 there were some 3,000 feeding on tipulid larvae on the hillsides above Pont ar Elan and the last triple-figure count in the area was 200 beside Craig Goch Reservoir on 25th August 2001. Since then it has been rare to see more than 50 anywhere in the area at that time of year and in most years there are none. Similarly there were 2,000 around Llyn Heilyn on 12th August 1979 - unheard of numbers today until October. Judging from sample surveys and counts in July and August, the breeding population of Radnorshire in 2012 was probably fewer than 300 pairs.

It seems likely that these peaks and troughs over the last few hundred years are due to climatic fluctuations affecting the availability of summer food, particularly tipulid larvae, and therefore the survival of the season's juveniles.

British bred Starlings are very sedentary with 80% of the 11,000 ringing recoveries being found under 20km away from the place of ringing and the mean distance being only 1km. Birds from the continent start to arrive in September, especially from the low countries. However, the main influxes come in late October and November, usually at the same time as Wood Pigeons, Fieldfares and Woodcock arrive in numbers in the county. Arrivals continue throughout November and even into December, especially when there is cold weather to the north and east. Groups of birds may be seen by day flying west and south anywhere in the county and many tens of thousands of birds sometimes arrive and pass through in just a few days.

The following are typical examples of such movements: At the end of October 2006 there were 8,000 near Craig Goch Reservoir on 27th and 11,000 flew south-west over Radnor Forest on 28th when 2,000 were at Glasbury. In 2009 there were 3,500 newly arrived near Llyn Heilyn on 23rd October and 4,000

were in the upper Elan Valley on 28th. Three thousand flew south and east down the Edw Valley on 14th October 2011 and on 29th October 2012 a total of 4,500 flew west up the Wye Valley at Glasbury and 3,300 flew west at New Radnor.

Many tens of thousands of birds stay in Radnorshire throughout the winter provided that the ground does not become frozen and snow cover does not last for any length of time. Noisy flocks of several hundreds systematically probing grasslands is a common sight in the county, as are groups of 10-50 ridding garden lawns of leatherjackets and aerating the soil in the process. At Garnfawr, near Franksbridge, there were 3,000 in the fields throughout the winter of 1987/8 and 5,000 near Llandrindod Wells on 15th February 1974. Large feeding flocks are often present in the Elan and Claerwen Valleys in winter, depending on the tipulid populations. There were 7-8,000 present in the Pont ar Elan area from January to March 2007 and 4,000 at Claerwen Farm on 13th March 1999.

The main roosting area in Radnorshire is in the conifer plantations of the Llanfihangel nant Melan/Llandegly Rhos area which has been used since at least the late 1970s. The plantation by Llandegly Rhos held 20,000 birds on 16th January 1978 and 29th November 1983 and had 10-50,000 occasionally between November and March in most winters between 1986 and 2000. Plantations in the nearby Fforest Inn area used to hold most of the birds with a small wood at Llanfihangel having a roost of 10-60,000 birds for most of the time during the winters between 1984 and 2002. However, shooting of the roost took place at times in an effort to persuade the birds to go elsewhere, which they have done for the most part ever since.

Since 2003 the roost has largely moved to Llandegly Rhos and steadily increased in numbers with counts at dawn and dusk producing average figures of between 135,000 and 180,000 birds. It is likely that even more birds use the roost on occasion especially in early November and late February/early March - soon after the main arrivals from the continent and prior to emigration. The highest counts are made during periods of fine, calm, weather and the fewest during very windy, wet and stormy, conditions when birds presumably find somewhere closer to their daytime feeding areas to spend the night. The current age and planting density of the plantation seems to be ideal for roosting Starlings and although predators such as Hen Harrier, Merlin, Sparrowhawk, Goshawk and Short-eared Owl are in attendance most evenings, the site is undoubtedly safer than ones used in the area in the past.

At least 65% to 75% of the birds now come from areas to the east of the roosting area and this seems to account for most of the increase in numbers as many fewer did so prior to 2001. Birds not only come from all parts of Radnorshire but also from well into Herefordshire with flight lines traced at least as far east as Shobdon. In general birds come in from a radius of c.25km.

Another roost in conifers by Perthi Common (on lower ground about five miles to the south-west of Llandegly Rhos) also held a large roost in some winters between 1987 and 2009 when the site was clearfelled. The site was used mainly as an alternative to the Llanfihangel/Llandegly area during periods

of very cold and windy weather. There were at least 70,000 there on 25th November 1988 and 50-75,000 during January and February 1993 and January 1999.

A roost in *Phragmites* and willows at Aberithon Turbary held 50,000 birds during the first half of January 1995, declining to 1,000 by the end of the month, and there were 50,000+ at a roost at Stonewall Hill on 20th February 1971.

Roosts are usually occupied from October to March but many thousands of birds continued to use Llandegley well into April during the exceptionally cold late-winter/early spring of 2013.

There have been 16 birds ringed elsewhere in England and Wales and recovered in Powys coming from Gloucestershire, Dyfed (3), Glamorgan, Gwent, Gwynedd, Hereford & Worcester, Lancashire, Yorkshire (2), Shropshire (2), Staffordshire, Suffolk and the West Midlands. Also 11 birds ringed in Powys have been recovered in Dyfed, Glamorgan (4), Gwent (2), Hereford & Worcester, Oxfordshire (2) and Warwickshire. In addition to these there have been birds from Belgium, Denmark (2), Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania (4), Poland, Russia, Sweden (2) and the Netherlands (3). And birds ringed in Powys have been found in Germany (3), the Netherlands (2) and Sweden.

Birds ringed and retrapped at Garnfawr, near Franksbridge, in the 1990s provided an interesting series of recoveries. A breeding female ringed at Norg, Netherlands, on 29th May 1996 was caught there on 22nd December and a nestling ringed at Bladers Hage, Sweden, on 28th May 1994 was caught on 28th December 1995. An adult ringed at Garnfawr on 24th January 1996 was killed hitting a window at Friesland, Netherlands, about the 25th March 1996 and one ringed on 27th December 1995 fell down a chimney and then hit a window at Sawbridge, near Rugby, on 3rd July 1997. Two birds ringed on 21st and 24th December 1996 were both recovered in Germany in April and July of the following year just 20km apart. A young male ringed on 31st December 1996 was killed by a cat at Pembridge, Herefordshire, on 2nd August 1997, where it was doubtless breeding. It seems that the flocks found in Radnorshire in winter are a mixture of birds which breed 'locally' in England and Wales as well as from various parts of the continent.

Other ringing recoveries have included an adult male ringed at Duinberg, Belgium, on 3rd November 1978 and reported dead from Howey on 21st January 1980. A first-year female ringed at Bardsey Island Bird Observatory on 16th October 1988 was found dead at Llanyre on 20th March 1989 and a first-year male ringed in North Yorkshire on 26th September 1954 was shot at Presteigne on 16th June 1955. A first-year female ringed at Howey on 19th January 1997 was caught at Heligoland Island Bird Observatory, off the coast of northern Germany, on 21st November 2001.