

# **The Wealden Heaths Breeding Bird Survey 1998-2022**

25-year trends in priority and non-priority breeding species  
on the West Sussex Wealden Heaths

Alan Perry



Sussex Ornithological Society

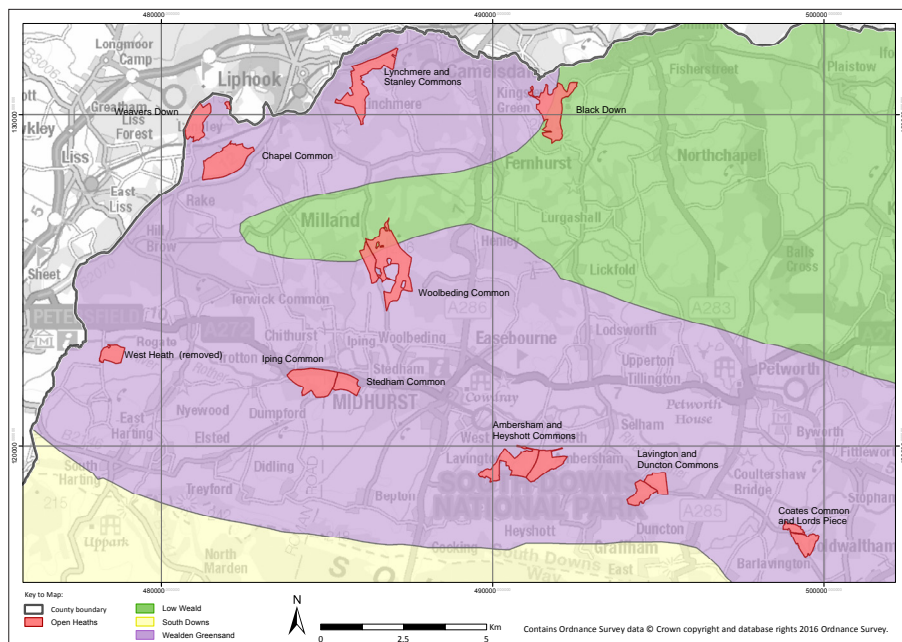
*This is the full version of a shorter paper which was published in the Sussex Bird Report of 2022 dealing with just the priority species.*

The Wealden Heaths Breeding Bird Survey (WHBBS) commenced in 1998 as a joint venture between the Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire and Berkshire bird societies, with 2022 marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the survey in Sussex. The original aim was to assess the status on the Wealden Heaths of 21 bird species, five of which (Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, Woodlark *Lullula arborea*, Dartford Warbler *Curruca undata*, Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* and Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*) were priority species for a possible Special Protection Area (SPA) designation. When the joint venture finished in the early 2000s Sussex continued with the survey. This paper provides a summary of the overall status of the five priority and eight non-priority species and makes comparison with data for the UK and England, and where available the Sussex Breeding Bird Survey (BBS).

The paper includes data from 1998 to 2022. The survey was maintained even through the COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021 although the Foot & Mouth outbreak prevented any survey work in 2001. For the previous detailed report, covering 1998-2015, see Perry (2016).

## Introduction

There are ten heaths within the survey: Weavers Down, Chapel Common, Lynchmere & Stanley Commons, Black Down, Iping Common, Stedham Common (although close these latter two sites are treated as being separate), Woolbeding Common, Ambersham & Heyshott Commons (including Goldballs Plantation), Lavington Common/Plantation & Duncton Common, and Coates Common including Lords Piece. They are under various ownerships: private, National Trust, County Council or Sussex Wildlife Trust. Figure 1 shows the location of these heaths.



**Figure 1.** Map showing location of principal heaths surveyed.

Subsequently two clear felled sites at Graffham (2015) and Broad Halfpenny (2012) have been added but are not part of this 25-year report. One obvious omission from the survey is the RSPB owned heath adjoining the Pulborough Brooks Reserve, as the organisation monitors it themselves following major restoration work.

## Method

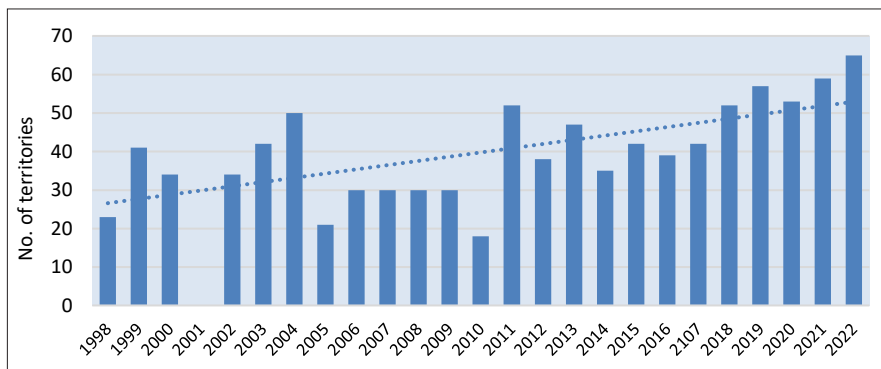
Once the Society decided to continue the survey, it was agreed that the original methods and species should remain to ensure the long-term consistency of the data. The surveyors are asked to undertake visits from late February through to the middle of July with an aim to cover all parts of each site on at least four occasions and on at least one evening visit between late May and mid-July to locate Nightjar and Woodcock, then to plot the location of pairs or territorial males on the provided maps and assess the total number of pairs/territorial males of each species in each 1-km square. Additionally, they are asked to note any major habitat changes/restoration work.

## Trends & Comparisons

Two methods to express the overall changes in numbers on the survey sites have been used. Where appropriate, linear regression to give the % change in the total numbers recorded from 1998 to 2022, and where there was no clear linear trend the ratio of the mean counts in 1998/99 and 2021/22 as a measure of change over the whole period (two-year means are used to limit the impact of annual fluctuations). These WHBBS trends have been compared with figures from the BTO BirdFacts (BTO 2022) database for the UK and where relevant England. The WHBBS spans the 25 years 1998-2022 and whilst the latest figures from BirdFacts are for 1998-2021, this is close enough to provide robust comparisons. Where available Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) population trends in Sussex 1994-2020 are also shown.

## Priority Species

### Nightjar

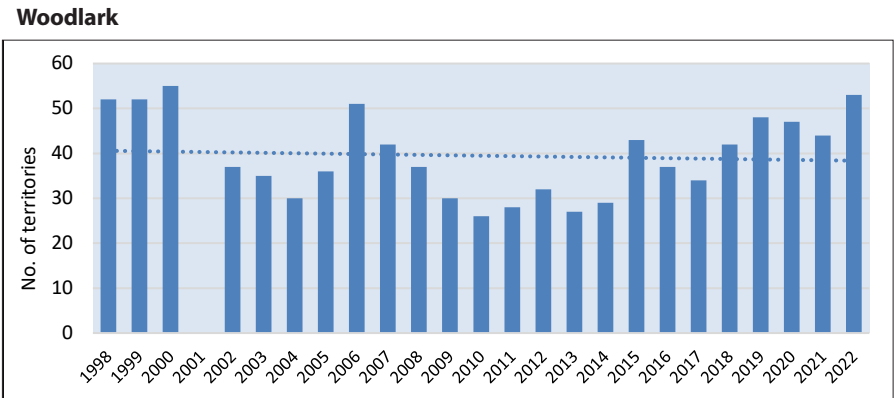


**Figure 2.** Numbers of Nightjars recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

A crepuscular species that arrives from Africa in early May and leaves normally no later than mid-September (Thomas 2014). This is the one bird of the five priority species that despite being a migrant has provided a consistently increasing trend perhaps benefitting from warming summers and the restoration/management works, particularly on the larger heaths. In 2022, 65 territories

were recorded, the survey’s highest annual count. The only national data available are from the results of periodic atlas surveys (Balmer et al. 2013). These results showed that the number of 10-km squares occupied and with evidence of breeding, during periodic breeding distribution atlases (1968–72 to 2008–11) was +45.5%. The WHBBS 25-year trend is +104%. In 2015 the species was moved from the Red to the Amber list in Birds of Conservation Concern 5 (Stanbury et al. 2021).

In 2022 all ten WHBBS sites site reported territorial activity with unsurprisingly the largest site, Ambersham/Heyshott, the most productive with 18, followed by Black Down ten and Iping and Lavington Common & Plantation nine each. Low numbers of between one and three were found at Weavers Down, Lynchmere/Stanley and Coates/Lords Piece, perhaps reflecting management issues and/or leisure usage.

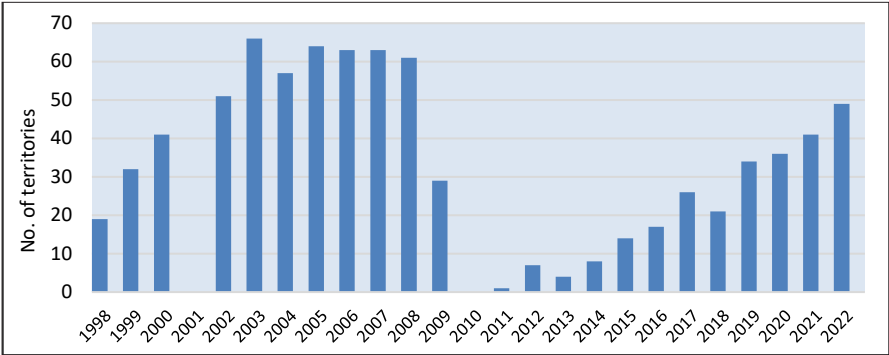


**Figure 3.** Numbers of Woodlarks recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

Although occasionally detected on the heaths through the early winter period, territories are normally claimed from mid-February. Numbers increased dramatically 1998-2000 with the extensive restoration undertaken providing an ideal habitat of low swathes of heather, cut bracken and bare earth areas. Thereafter until 2015 the population experienced a fluctuating trend but since that date territory numbers have been over 30 and in the last five years over 40. The 2022 total of 53 territories was the second highest count of the survey. Possibly on-going management work, inhibiting extensive regrowth and favourable weather conditions, have assisted the recent increases. The only national data available are from the results of periodic atlas surveys (Balmer et al. 2013). These results showed that the number of 10-km squares occupied and with evidence of breeding during periodic breeding distribution atlases (1968–72 to 2008–11) was -23%. Despite some volatility the overall WHBBS 25-year trend was -7%.

In 2022 nine of the ten heathlands held between three and nine territories. Lynchmere/Stanley Commons have throughout the survey been disappointing with 2022 producing only one territory.

**Dartford Warbler**

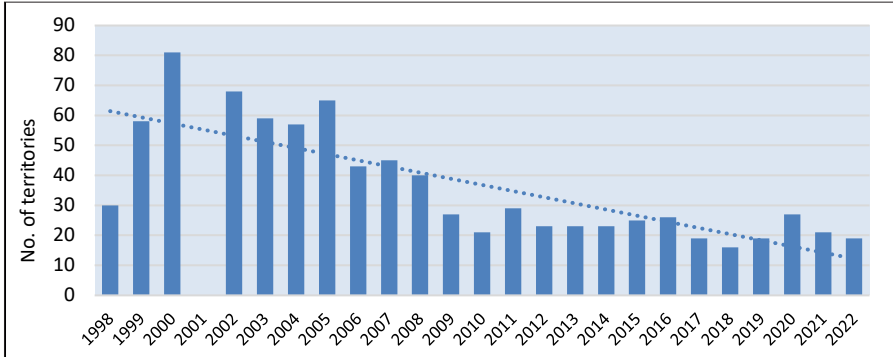


**Figure 4.** Numbers of Dartford Warblers recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022

Reliant on an open heather and gorse habitat it is resident and consequently is susceptible to harsh winters. There is no doubt that restoration of heathland, favourable weather conditions and ongoing management of scrub such as birch and pine, especially at the turn of the century, enabled the population to expand swiftly until it was brought abruptly to a halt by the catastrophically bad winters of 2009/10 and 2010/11 which obliterated the breeding population. None were found in 2010 and only one in 2011. Thereafter the population gradually recovered but is yet to return to the 2003-2008 levels. The only national data available are from the results of periodic atlas surveys (Balmer et al. 2013). These results showed that the number of 10-km squares occupied and with evidence of breeding during periodic breeding distribution atlases (1968-72 to 2008-11) was +380.5%. A more useful statistical trend for the West Sussex Wealden Heaths is that the population has continued to climb since the 2010 total wipe-out and in 2022 was within 25% of the peak count of 66 recorded in 2003.

The 2022 results show that two of the best managed sites, Black Down and Iping, with extensive heather and gorse habitat, had the highest counts at ten each, followed by Chapel Common (nine), Ambersham/Heyshott (eight) and Lavington (five). Only Stedham had none. However, the lack of numbers particularly on Lynchmere/Stamley, Woolbeding and Weavers Down is disappointing.

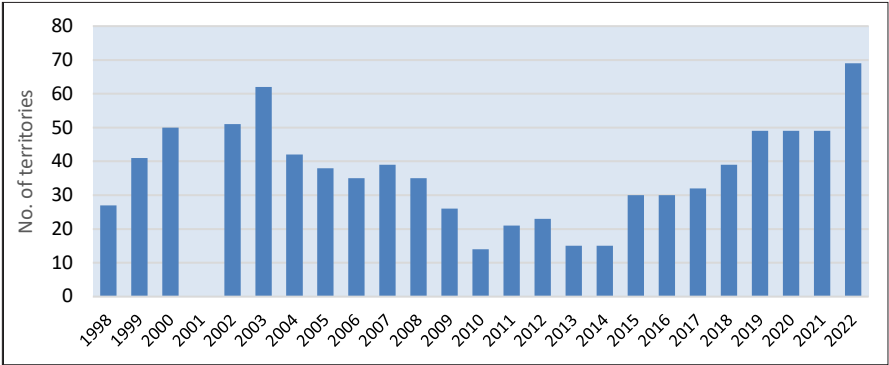
**Tree Pipit**



**Figure 5.** Numbers of Tree Pipits recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

An Afro/Palearctic migratory species arriving in the UK at the end of March early April (Thomas 2014), it is the only one of the priority species not to show a stable or positive trend. It has steadied since 2012 but at very low numbers and remains absent from many sites with what appears to be perfectly good habitat. An example is Woolbeding Common which between 1998-2003 provided annual counts of between ten and 20, but only one was found in 2022 after three years absence. Although extensive management had caused some disturbance to the habitat at this heath it does appear to be ideal now. In 2022 seven sites held territorial males but totals were all in single figures. Iping was the highest with five and remains the most reliable site. Although the reasons for the fall in population are not fully understood, as a long-distance migratory species it maybe that the problems lie in the African wintering grounds and/or on the migration route or due to climate change and food availability. Additionally, nest predation has been recorded as a reason for low productivity for a population in the Brecks of East Anglia (Burton 2009). Like many other long-distance migrants, Tree Pipits are doing less badly in Scotland and northern England. The overall UK trend according to BTO BirdFacts (BTO 2022) is -24% but there is a steeper decline for England only of -66%. The WHBBS 25-year trend is -81% but numbers appear to have stabilised, albeit at a low level, since 2010.

Stonechat

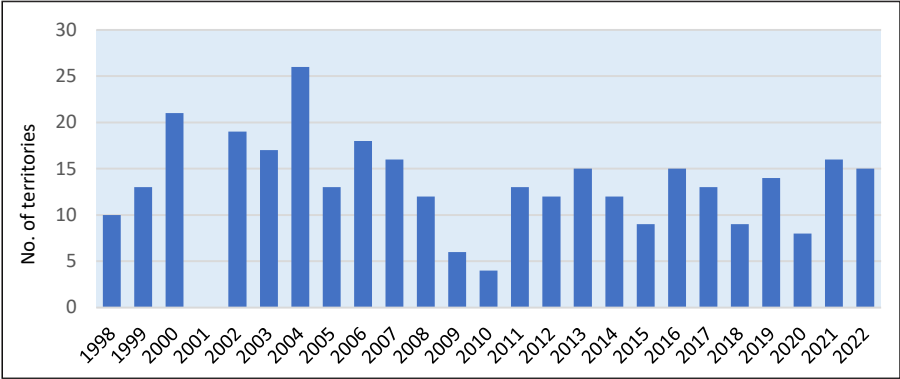


**Figure 6.** Numbers of Stonechats recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns).

Associated in Sussex with either the Downs or heathland (Thomas 2014) the species is often first heard giving its alarm call similar to two flints chinking together, and such is its bold persona that it often acts as a sentry to other species especially Dartford Warbler (pers. ob.). The species did well at the beginning of the survey, but numbers decreased thereafter and were exacerbated by the appalling winters of 2009/10 and 2010/11 and harsh spring of 2013. The subsequent recovery has resulted, encouragingly, in the highest count of the survey in 2022 of 69 territories. Surprisingly absent from Lynchmere/Stanley Commons, the heaths of Black Down, Iping and Ambersham/Heyshott produced the highest numbers. The overall UK trend according to BTO BirdFacts (BTO 2022) is +144%. The WHBBS 25-year trend is +76%.

Non-Priority Species (where sufficient data is available)

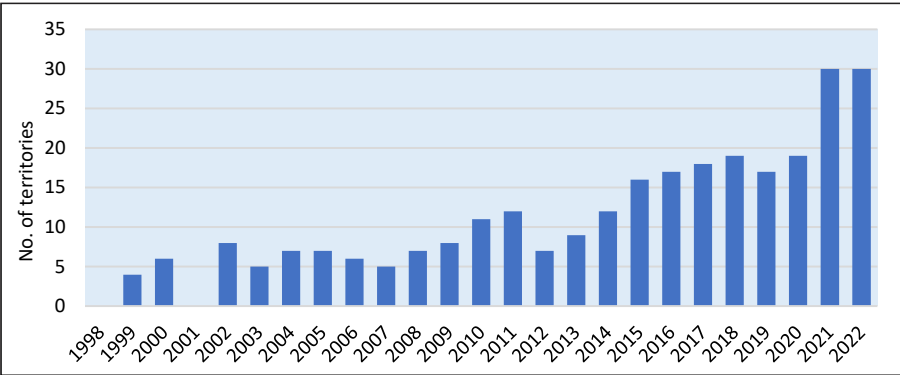
Woodcock



**Figure 7.** Numbers of Woodcock recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

In Sussex the Western Wealden Heaths and Ashdown Forest are the main centres of population. WHBBS surveyors monitored roding birds. The trend since the challenging winters of 2009/10-2010/11 has been stable although numbers have not returned to the earlier years of the survey when a maximum of 26 was recorded in 2004. Fifteen were recorded in 2022 (eight at Black Down). WHBBS 25-year trend -31%. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) states “Woodcock breeding range has contracted markedly and now stands at less than half its 1960s extent, supporting other evidence of a gradual population decline.” It was moved from Amber to Red status on the UK’s Birds of Conservation Concern in December 2015.

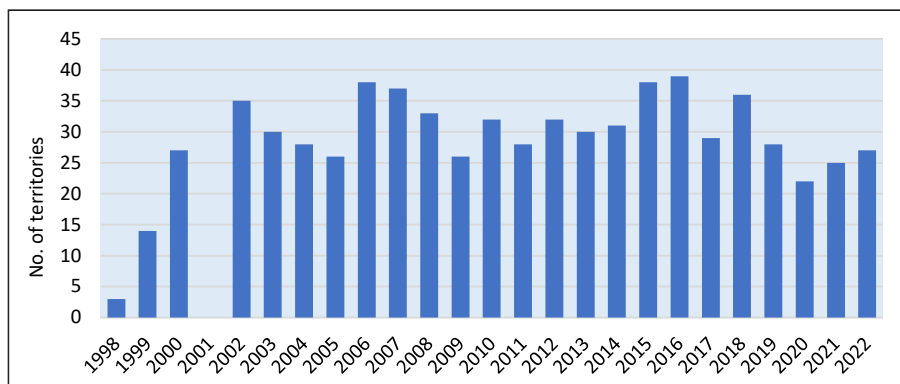
Stock Dove



**Figure 8.** Numbers of Stock Doves recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

The overall UK trend by BirdFacts (BTO 2022) of +37% and the BBS trend for Sussex (1994-2021) of +72% are evidence of an expanding population and it is likely that the species has benefited from older trees with nest holes not being felled. A startling WHBBS increase of +650% is possibly partially due to a greater surveyor effort on behalf of the species, particularly since 2010.

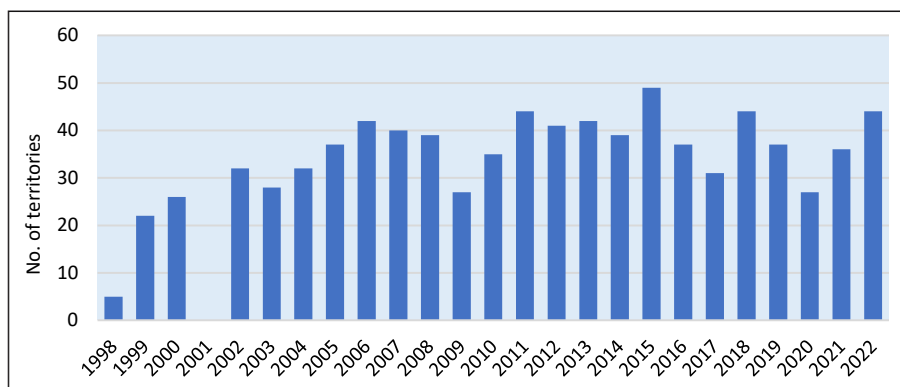
### Green Woodpecker



**Figure 9.** Numbers of Green Woodpeckers recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

Widespread throughout the WHBBS area Green Woodpecker retains a strong presence and in contrast to the BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend of -12% and the Sussex BBS results (1994-2021) of -1% the WHBBS 25-year trend is +32%. A possible factor is the availability of food, particularly ants.

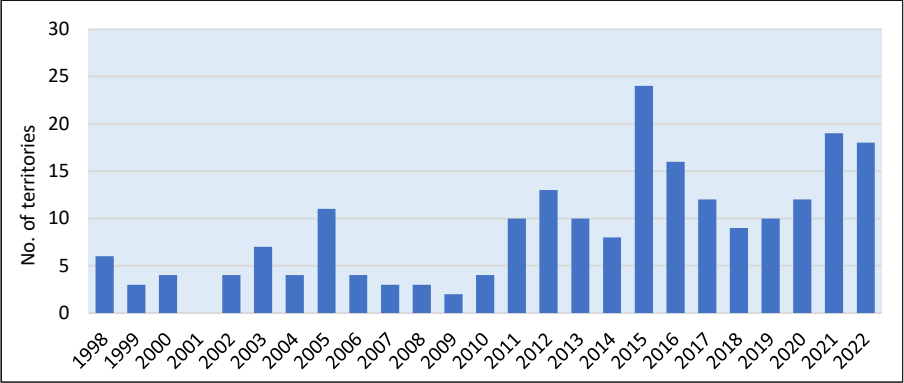
### Great Spotted Woodpecker



**Figure 10.** Numbers of Great Spotted Woodpeckers recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

Common throughout WHBBS sites, the increasing trend appears robust with 44 recorded in 2022. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend +99%. BBS trend for Sussex (1994-2021) +147%. WHBBS 25-year trend +60%.

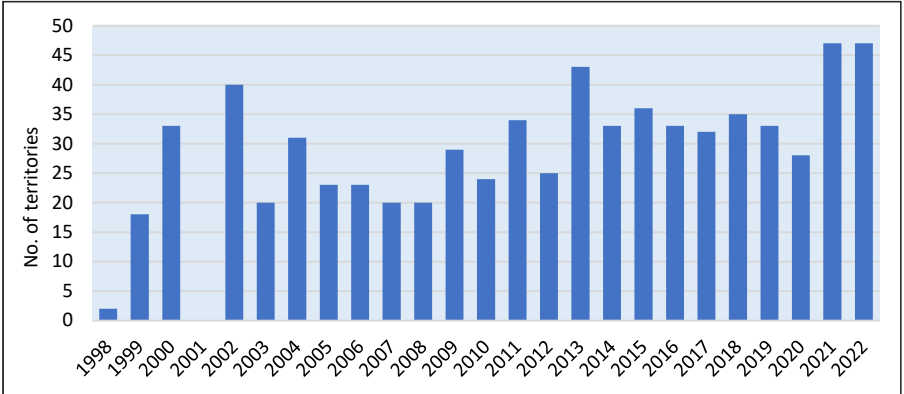
Common Redstart



**Figure 11.** Numbers of Redstarts recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

The two main centres of population in the County are Ashdown Forest and the western Wealden Heaths, the former holding the larger population. In the WHBBS area it is found mainly on the north-east heaths of Lynchmere/Stanley, Weavers Down, Black Down and Chapel Common, with between one or two irregularly reported from Iping and Ambersham/Heyshott Commons. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend of -9% contrasts with the WHBBS 25-year trend of +400%. Other than an exceptional count of 24 in 2015 due mainly to the 10 reported at Lynchmere/ Stanley Commons, it is encouraging that 2021 and 2022 have been the next most successful years of the survey. The highest single site count in 2022 was of six on Black Down

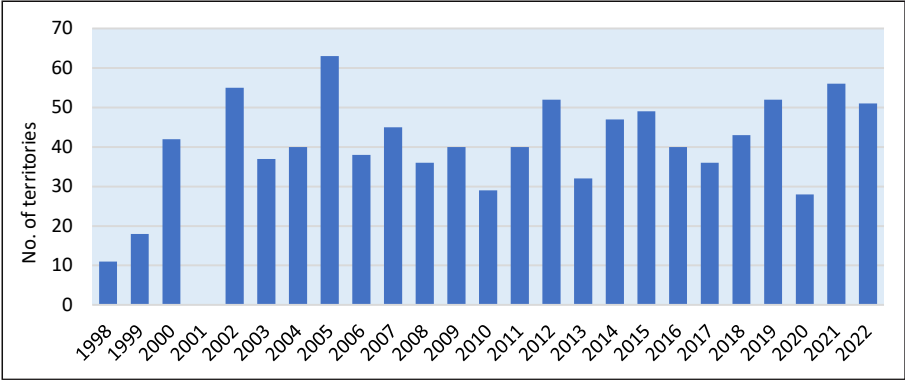
Common Whitethroat



**Figure 12.** Numbers of Common Whitethroats recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

A common summer visitor in Sussex the WHBBS population shows an increasing trend with the survey's highest counts (47) in 2021 and 2022 respectively. Woolbeding with 11 (mainly breeding in the scrub rather than the gorse and heather) provided the highest single site count, with nine at Black Down. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend is +13%, the WHBBS 25-year trend +160%.

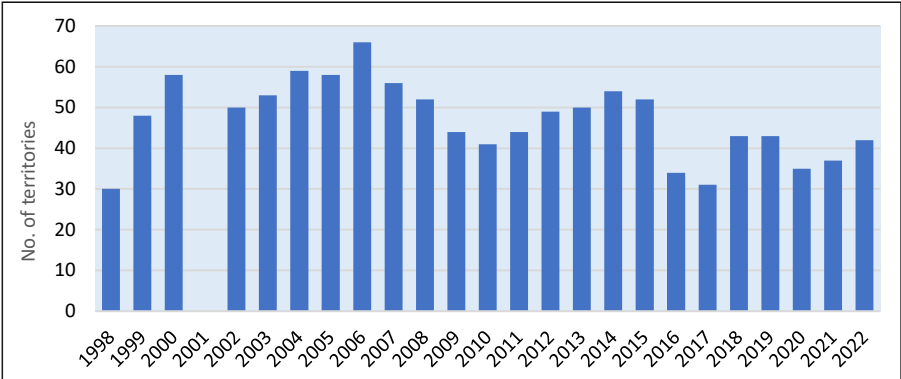
Linnet



**Figure 13.** Numbers of Linnets recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

Present at all ten sites, the species particularly favours gorse for nest building with mature heather the alternative. A WHBBS 25-year trend of +38% contrasts with the BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend of -12% and is rather better than the BBS trend for Sussex (1994-2021) of +14%.

Yellowhammer



**Figure 14.** Numbers of Yellowhammers recorded by the WHBBS in each year 1998-2022 (blue columns) and the dotted blue line is the linear regression trend.

During the early years of the survey the species could be found on the north and west heaths of Weavers Down, Chapel Common, Black Down and Lynchmere/Stanley Commons but is now absent. The five lower, southerly heaths of Iping, Stedham, Ambersham & Heyshott, Lavington Common/Plantations and Coates Common/Lords Piece are where the bulk of the remaining population reside excepting that the high heath of Woolbeding produced in 2022 an exceptional count of 22. The trend however is of a declining population, BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend -19%. BBS trend for Sussex (1994-2021) -32%. WHBBS 25-year trend -27%.

## Brief commentary on remaining species

### **Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur*.

Recorded before the turn of the century at Coates Common (one) and Heyshott Common (two) there have been no further reports. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend -98%.

### **Skylark** *Alauda arvensis*.

Has bred occasionally on Chapel Common, where a single territory was recorded in 2019. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend -9%. BBS trend for Sussex (1994-2021) -15%.

### **Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis*.

Has not been recorded as holding territory despite occasional temporary residency. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend -16%.

### **Hobby** *Falco subbuteo*.

Although seen regularly on WHBBS sites, particularly hawking for dragonflies on the open heathland, there are few potential breeding reports. The most regular sites for reporting birds holding territory or breeding are from the Lavington, Ambersham/Heyshott and Iping areas. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend -6%.

### **Lesser Redpoll** *Acanthis cabaret*.

Although the metallic buzzing is often heard on the heaths (pers. ob.) the species is only occasionally recorded as holding territory. In 2022 two territories were reported from both Black Down and Ambersham/Heyshott. This species is likely to be under recorded due to the difficulty of confirming territory (pers. ob.). BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend +4%.

### **Siskin** *Spinus spinus*.

Favouring wooded heathland especially conifer and birch, the recording of this species for the survey has varied and where reported, numbers seldom reach more than five. Regularly detected annually at most of the WHBBS sites during the breeding season, it is however, as with Lesser Redpoll, likely to be under recorded (pers. comm.). BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend +24%.

### **Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra*.

Feeding on pine-cone seeds, it is an irruptive species moving south when the pine crop is poor in its more northerly habitats. It has been recorded in 14 out of the 25 years of the survey. In 12 of the occupied years single figures were recorded at Ambersham & Heyshott, Lavington and Coates. However, in 2021 and 2022, totals of 19 and 13 respectively were not only by far the highest counts of the survey but the majority of records were from Black Down (eight & nine) and Lynchmere & Stanley Commons (six & two). It is often a very early breeder in the year and has possibly been under recorded. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend -22%.

### **Reed Bunting** *Emberiza schoeniclus*.

Favouring the lower southern heaths, one or two breed occasionally on Iping Common and it has bred on Lavington Plantation/Common and Heyshott Common, usually in the Molinia and heather (pers. ob.). An exceptional record was of five in 2022 at Coates/Lords Piece. BirdFacts (BTO 2022) overall UK trend +31%.

## The individual heaths

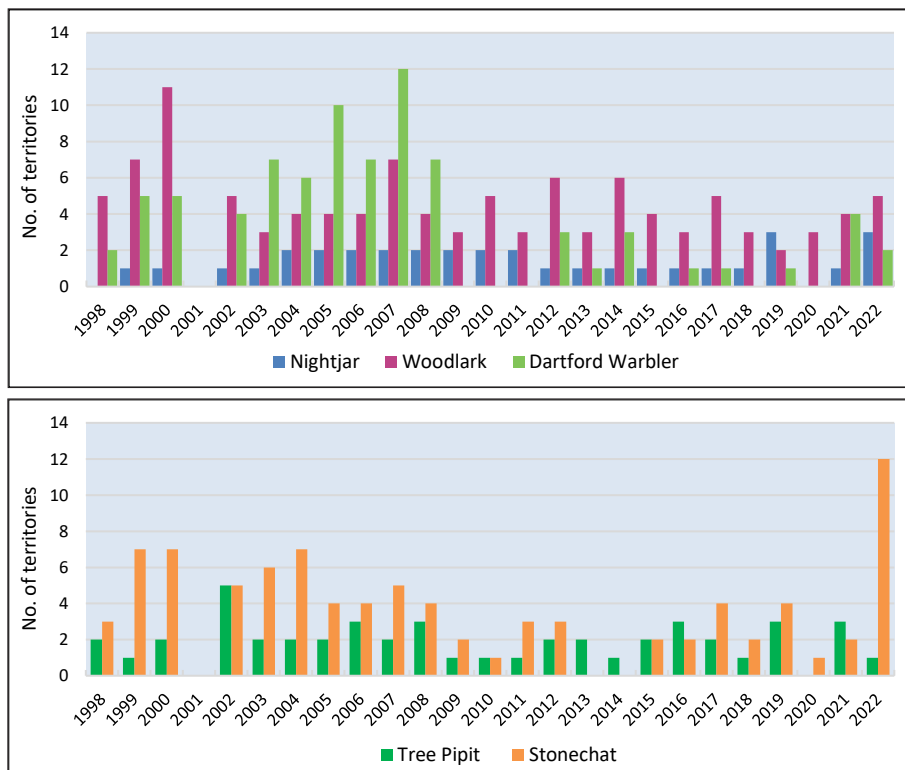
### Weavers Down.

Area 83 ha: Conservation Status: Part falls within the Wealden Heath's Phase 11 SPA. The same area is also designated as part of Woolmer Forest SSSI. Private Ownership.



**Figure 15.** The central area of Weavers Down (above) showing mature heather; and the southern aspect towards the edge of the acid grassland (below).

Situated in the south-east corner of Hampshire's Woolmer Forest SSSI and comprising a mixed habitat of ling, bell heather, dwarf gorse and small birch trees interspersed with occasional mature birch and pine trees. The extreme southerly area is an abandoned semi-improved rabbit grazed grassland with some gorse clumps, suitable for Stonechat, Woodlark and Linnet. The southern part of this site remains threatened as an extension to the adjoining golf course. Cattle are no longer grazed and it is used extensively by dog-walkers. Additionally, the survey area is deteriorating having received no recent management, suffering badly from scrub and bracken encroachment.



**Figure 16.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Weavers Down.

Apart from the occasional spike (an exceptional 12 Stonechat were recorded in 2022) overall numbers are low for the priority species. Four of these species are decreasing, whilst Nightjar is stable although with low numbers of between one and four.

Figures of four Redstart and 11 Linnet in 2022 were at the high end of the 25-year counts and are encouraging.

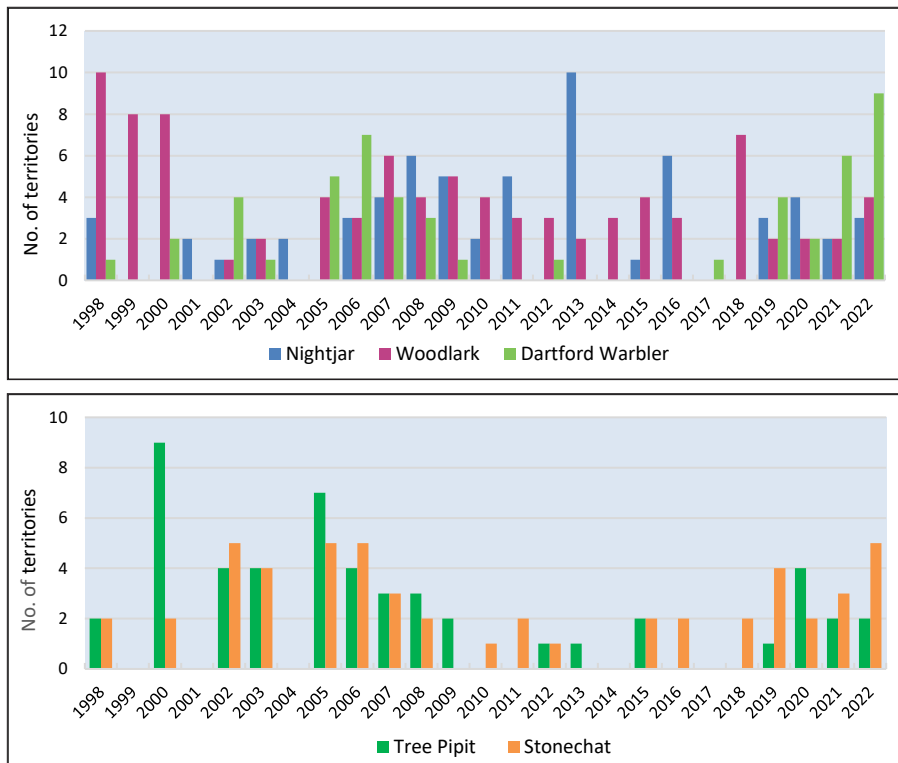
**Chapel Common.**

Area 98 ha. Conservation status: SSSI. Private ownership. Underlying geology: Hythe Beds.



**Figure 17.** The central area of Chapel Common (above), and the acid grassland west area of Chapel Common (below).

Improved immeasurably in the early years of the survey with Higher-Level Stewardship(HLF) funding resulting in extensive restoration work including regular grazing. The grazing ceased after a few years, and the heath subsequently deteriorated until recently, when some mowing of bracken and scrub took place. During the Covid lock-down period the site surveyor reported a noticeable increase in the mobility of the birds around the heath.



**Figure 18.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Chapel Common.

Nightjar and Dartford Warbler have slight increasing trends, as does Stonechat after recovering from the 2009/10 and 2010/11 winters. Woodlark numbers were excellent at the beginning of the survey however numbers fell away thereafter but have stabilised since 2018. The Tree Pipit population has typically decreased but remains present, two being recorded in 2022. Despite little heathland management and with continuing leisure activities a problem, the results from 2022 have been encouraging.

Skylark was a regular breeding species but has not been recorded since two in 2019. This was the only WHBBS site to hold the species in 25 years.

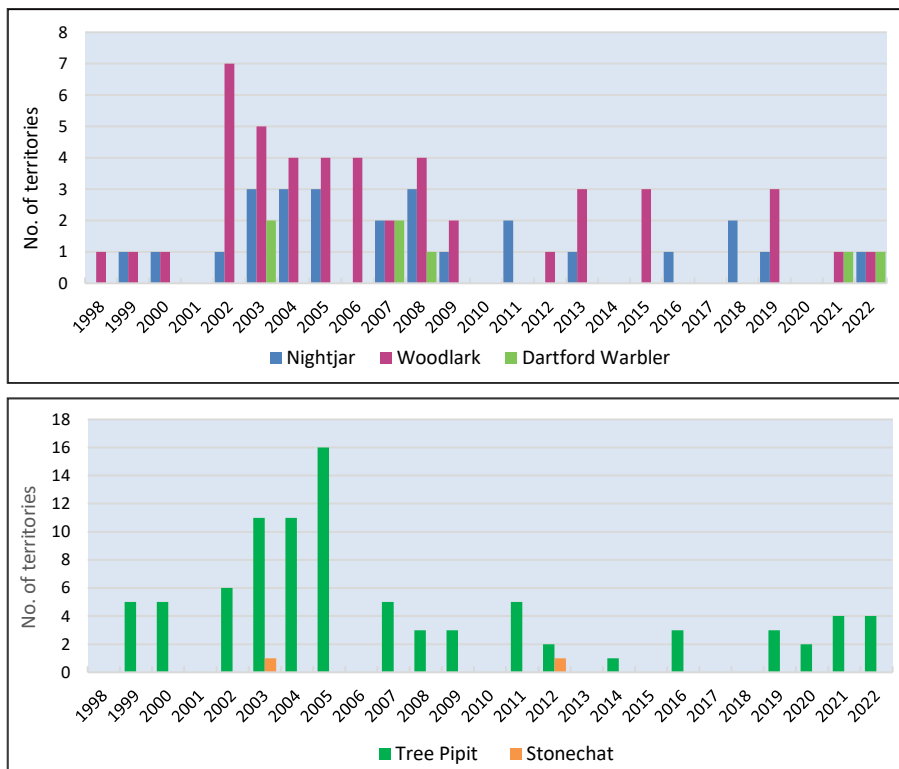
**Lynchmere and Stanley Commons.**

Area 106 ha. Conservation status: LNR. Ownership: The Lynchmere Society. Underlying geology: Hythe Beds.



**Figure 19.** The separately fenced Lynchmere Common in need of management (above); and the central area of Stanley Common (below).

The most northerly site in the survey, it was purchased in 1998 by the Lynchmere Society. The Lynchmere section is fully fenced as is much of Stanley Common and split by a relatively quiet road. The Society undertook very extensive restoration work after purchasing, which was largely funded by a HLF grant and a regime of regular grazing, by mainly Belted Galloways was instigated. Grazing has ceased and currently the site needs extensive management to inhibit further scrub regrowth particularly of Birch.



**Figure 20.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Lynchmere & Stanley Commons.

The priority species results have been very poor with all showing decreasing trends, the only bright spot being a stable Tree Pipit population over the past four years. Particularly disappointing is the fact that only two Stonechat have been recorded in the entire 25 years. Woodlark did well initially but in 2022 only one was found which was also the case for Nightjar and Dartford Warbler. This heathland and particularly the Stanley Common section should hold reasonable numbers of the priority species based upon the habitat; it is likely that pressure from leisure activities, particularly dog walking and especially on Lynchmere Common, are having a deleterious effect.

Redstart has been present regularly and it has been one of the two best sites for this species in the survey, four were found in 2022. Siskin numbers increased to six for the same year.

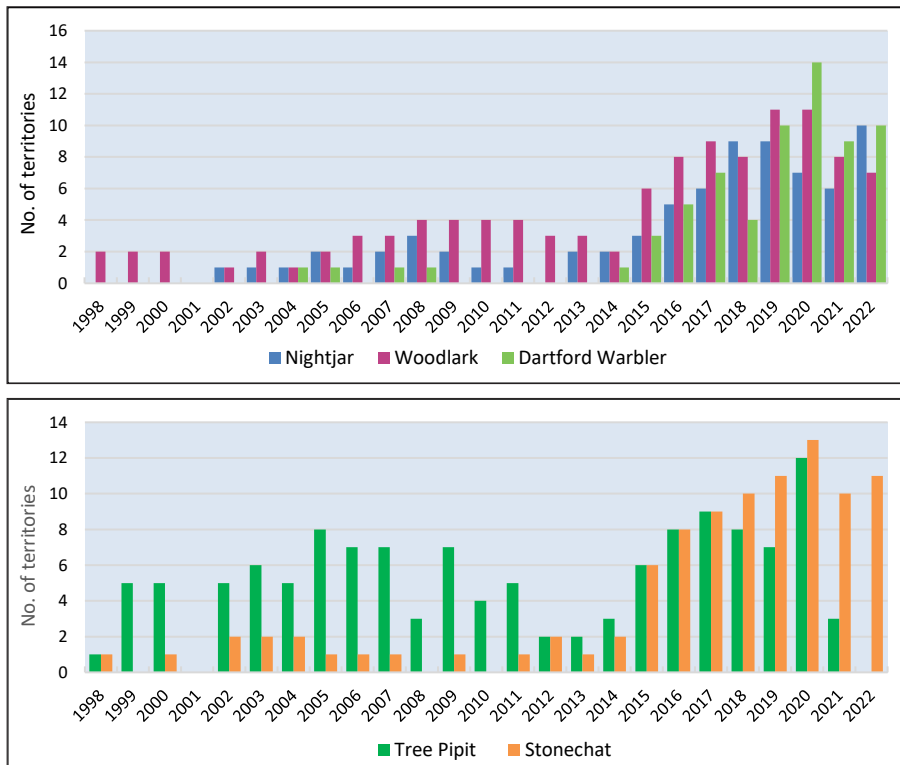
**Black Down.**

Area 91 ha. Conservation status: LNR. Ownership: National Trust (NT). Underlying geology: Hythe Beds



**Figure 21.** Black Down dew pond & heath beyond (above); and the central plateaux of mixed heath flora and trees (below).

At a peak height of 279.7 metres this is the highest point in the county. It is well managed by the National Trust (NT) with extensive open heath, areas of wooded heath, a beech hanger and dew ponds. Although criss-crossed by paths there is a circular route around the plateaux which is the main thoroughfare and consequently the bulk of the heath does not suffer overly from leisure use. Grazing is a regular feature .



**Figure 22.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Black Down.

Other than Tree Pipit which oddly disappeared completely in 2022 after a poor 2021 falling from what had been a healthy population in previous years (there is no obvious reason for such a swift collapse), the priority species have recorded strong positive trends since 2015.

In 2022 eight Woodcock were recorded, seven Stock Dove, six Redstart, nine Common Whitethroat, five Siskin and 10 Linnet and nine Crossbill. Apart from Yellowhammer which is absent this is proving to be a very productive site for the majority of priority and non-priority species.

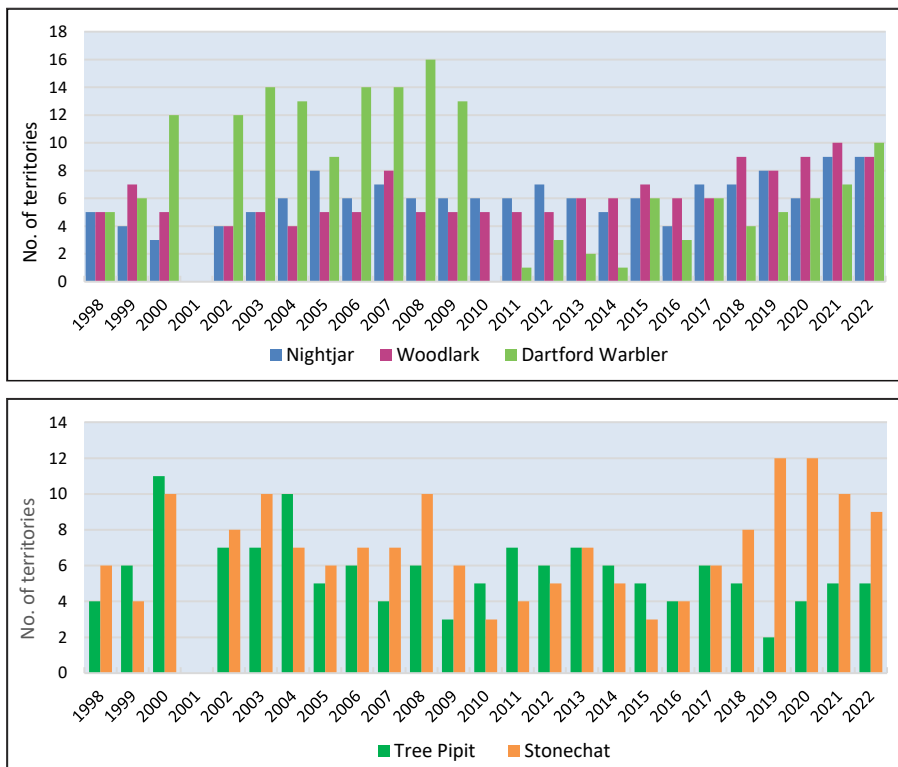
**Iping Common.**

Area 41 ha. Conservation status: SSSI and LNR. Ownership: Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) except an area of 9 ha owned by the Leconfield Estate and leased via West Sussex County Council (WSCC) to the SWT. Underlying geology: Folkestone Sands.



**Figure 23.** The southern aspect over the heath at Iping Common, taken from the ridge path (above); and the southern area of the heath, typical Woodlark and Nightjar habitat (below).

Mainly open heath comprising heather, gorse and moor grass with some controlled birch growth. A major event in 2018 was the accidental burning to the north and west of approximately one third of the heathland. Regeneration however occurred swiftly after the event and the area has been gradually repopulated although it remains unattractive to Dartford Warbler.



**Figure 24.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Iping Common.

The overall trends have been positive on this site. Having been one of the best sites for Dartford Warbler until the devastating winters of 2009/10 and 2010/11, numbers are re-building gradually, ten being recorded in 2022. Nightjar and Woodlark have remained stable throughout most of the survey period but are now trending positively. Tree Pipit peaked in 2000 and although now at lower numbers it is present annually. Stonechat has prospered, peaking in both 2019 and 2020 at 12.

Non-priority species records worth commenting on were of, in 2022, Linnet and Yellowhammer at six each and Reed Bunting at three. This is the most reliable WHBBS site for the latter species.

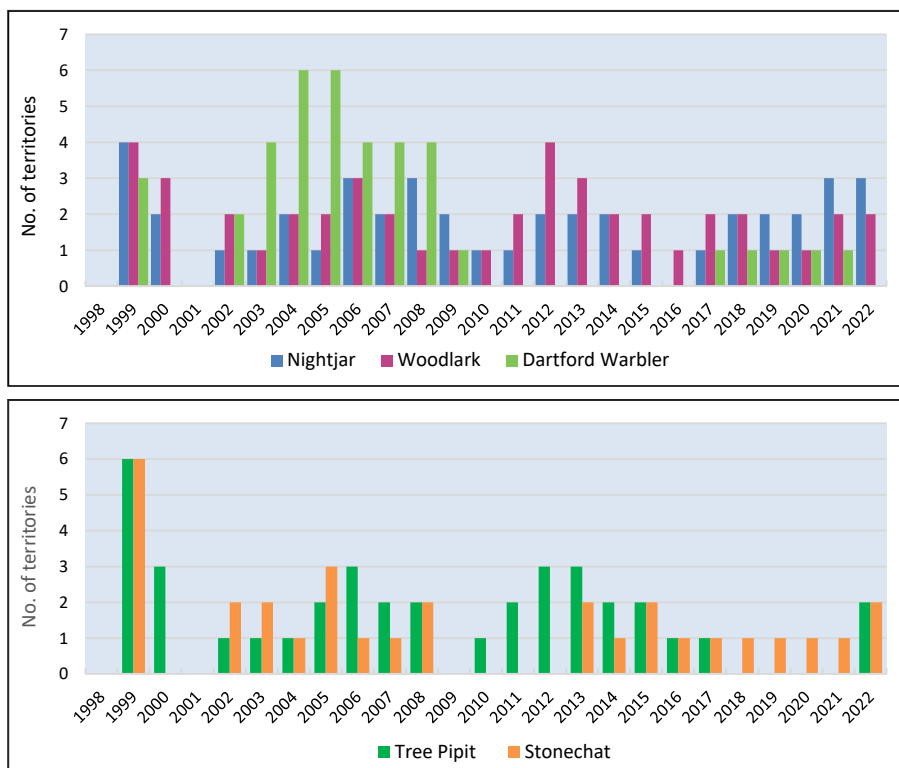
**Stedham Common.**

Area 35 ha. Conservation status: SSSI and LNR. Ownership: SWT. Underlying geology: Folkestone Sands



**Figure 25.** Central track through Stedham Common showing both wooded and open areas.

The freehold of Stedham Common was acquired by the SWT in 1985 and major restoration work followed. Overall, the habitat type is similar to that of Iping Common but is more wooded with extensive mature birch and pine.



**Figure 26.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Stedham Common.

A smaller heathland than Iping it has the advantage of being less popular for dog walkers etc. as it is situated over the road from the main carpark. Despite this advantage numbers of the priority species are low. In 2022 none exceeded three territories and surprisingly Dartford Warbler was absent and is only present intermittently.

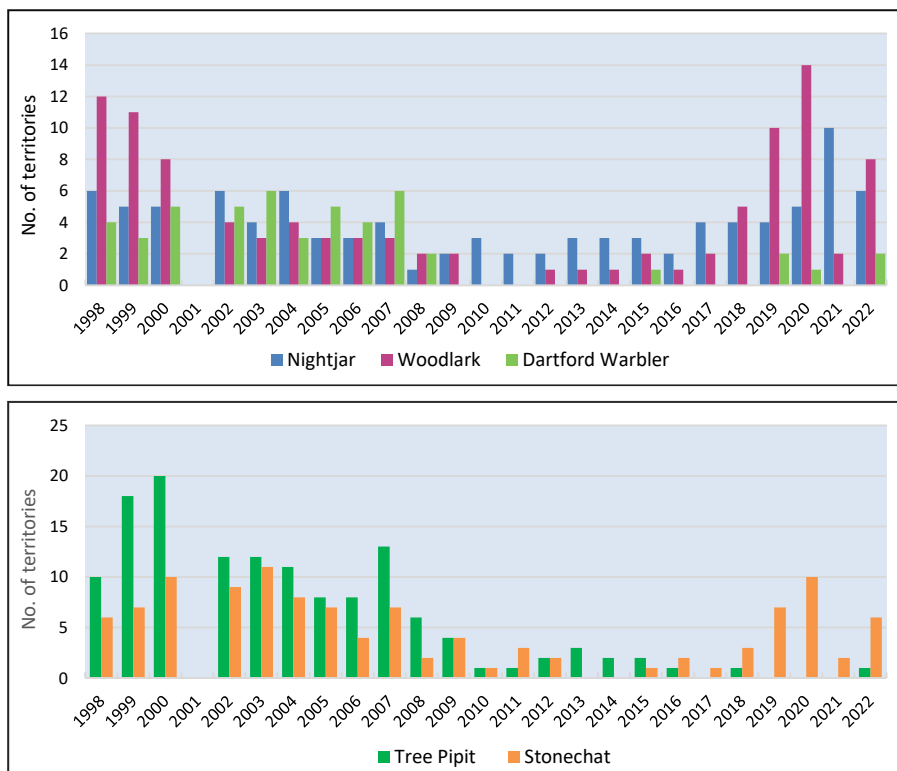
**Woolbeding Common.**

Area 190 ha. Conservation status: SSSI. Ownership: National Trust. Underlying geology: Hythe Beds.



**Figure 27.** Central area of Woolbeding Common with extensive heather and gorse (above) and northern part of heath with recent birch regrowth (below.)

At 190m maximum it is one of the higher heaths and has been the subject of extensive clearance and restoration work. Management is on-going, particularly scrub clearance, the heath now provides a mosaic habitat of heather expanse interspersed with gorse and birch, some old pasture woodland and secondary woodland. Until 2010 the site did not suffer from high levels of leisure activity but with the re-development and new build on the former King Edward V11 Hospital site, which has direct access onto the heath, an inevitable increase has occurred.



**Figure 28.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Woolbeding Common.

Despite it being the second largest site in the survey and well managed, the priority species numbers have been disappointing. However, in the past five years Nightjar and Stonechat have improved, Woodlark in particular has returned relatively strongly after being absent 2010-2011, but Dartford Warbler has only been recorded in four years since 2009 and then no more than two annually. Tree Pipit peaked at 20 in 2000 but for the past decade has not exceeded three annually with only one in 2022.

11 Common Whitethroat were recorded in 2022 (mainly occupying the scrub areas) and 21 Yellowhammers were exceptional.

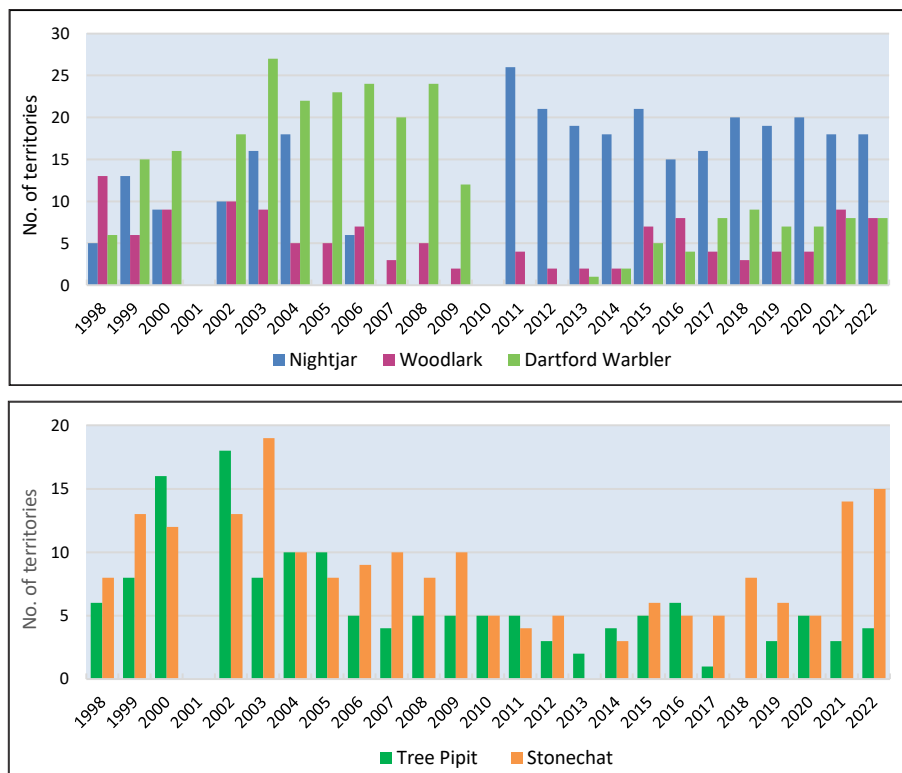
**Ambersham and Heyshott Commons including Goldballs Plantation.**

Area 450 ha. Conservation status: partly SSSI (SSSI area 146 ha). Ownership: Cowdray Estate.  
Underlying geology: Folkestone Sands.



**Figure 29.** The north-western aspect across Heyshott Common, taken from the parking area (above); and typical Dartford Warbler habitat of Ambersham Common (below).

The largest of the West Sussex heaths it is split by a minor road with Ambersham Common on the east and Heyshott Common on the west. It offers a wide range of habitats with extensive heather and gorse areas, valley bogs, acidic grassy areas and a mix of both coniferous and deciduous semi-natural heath woodland. Privately owned, management was intensive in the early years of the century, it is currently managed by the Landowner, assisted by SDNPA volunteers and rangers.



**Figure 30.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Ambersham & Heyshott Commons.

Nightjar has an increasing trend over the 25 years and currently this is the best heathland for the species in the survey area. Stonechat numbers were high at the beginning of the survey and after suffering in the adverse winters of 2009/10 and 2010/2011 have built up again with 2021 and 2022 reporting 14 and 15 respectively. Woodlark has remained stable albeit at low numbers as has Tree Pipit since 2006. Once the premier WHBBS site for Dartford Warbler, recovery after 2009/10 has been gradual with, eight territories recorded in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

For such a large heath Linnet and Yellowhammer numbers are low with six and four respectively in 2022.

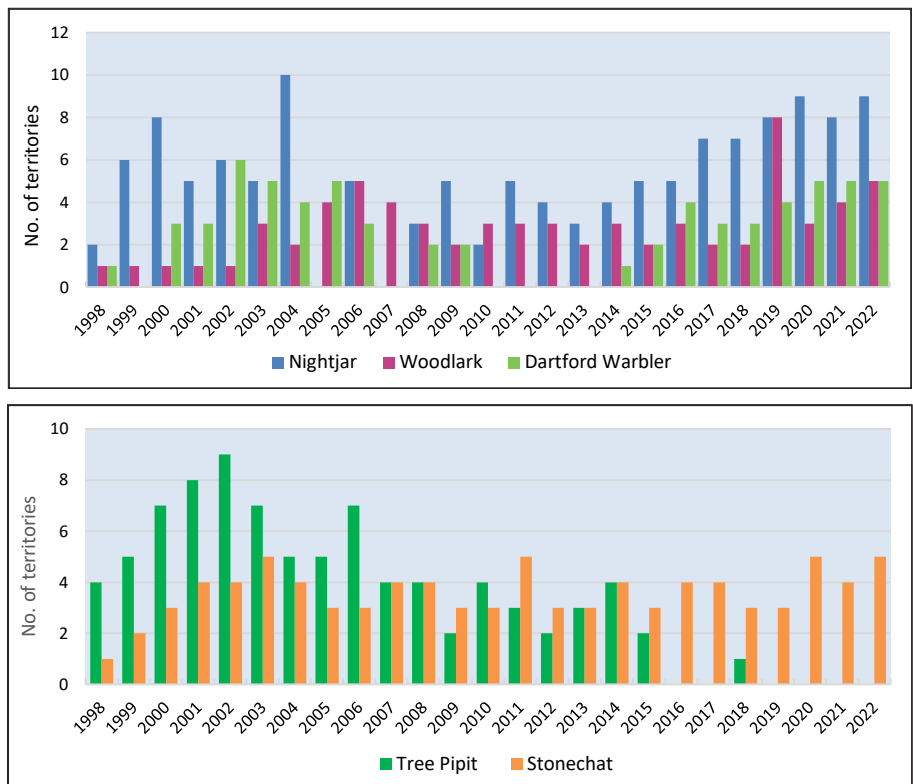
**Lavington Common, Lavington Plantation and Duncton Common.**

Areas: Lavington Common 31.11 ha, Lavington Plantation 33.65 ha, Duncton Common 60.79 ha. Conservation status: Lavington Common, SSSI; Duncton Common, LWS. Ownership: Lavington Common and Plantation, the National Trust; Duncton Common, Leconfield Estate plus a privately owned parcel of wooded heath. Underlying geology: Folkestone Sands.



**Figure 31.** Lavington Plantation 20 years after heath restoration project commenced (above); and the heather-dominated Lavington Common (below).

Comprising three distinctive areas, the former plantation section is fenced for grazing and was restored back to heathland 20 years ago, it is now a varied mosaic of heather gorse, mature pines with ongoing management of birch and bracken clearance, gorse cutting and formation of small pools in the wet areas. The Common is largely open heather with some birch and a pine wooded heath area on the southern side. Duncton Common is mainly conifer forestry and irregularly work is undertaken of felling, replanting and rhododendron removal.



**Figure 32.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Lavington Common, The Plantation and Duncton Common.

Nightjar, Woodlark, Dartford Warbler and Stonechat all show increasing trends with Tree Pipit the only negative. In 2002 the latter species numbered nine territories but since 2016 only one has been recorded. With nine found in 2022 it is possible that Nightjar are reaching an optimum density although Duncton does offer further opportunities when felling occurs. Dartford Warbler has slowly recovered from the 2009/11 winters.

Linnet and Yellowhammer had previously thrived on the Plantation, but recent gorse clearance has led to a fall in numbers with, in 2022 only five Linnet and one Yellowhammer

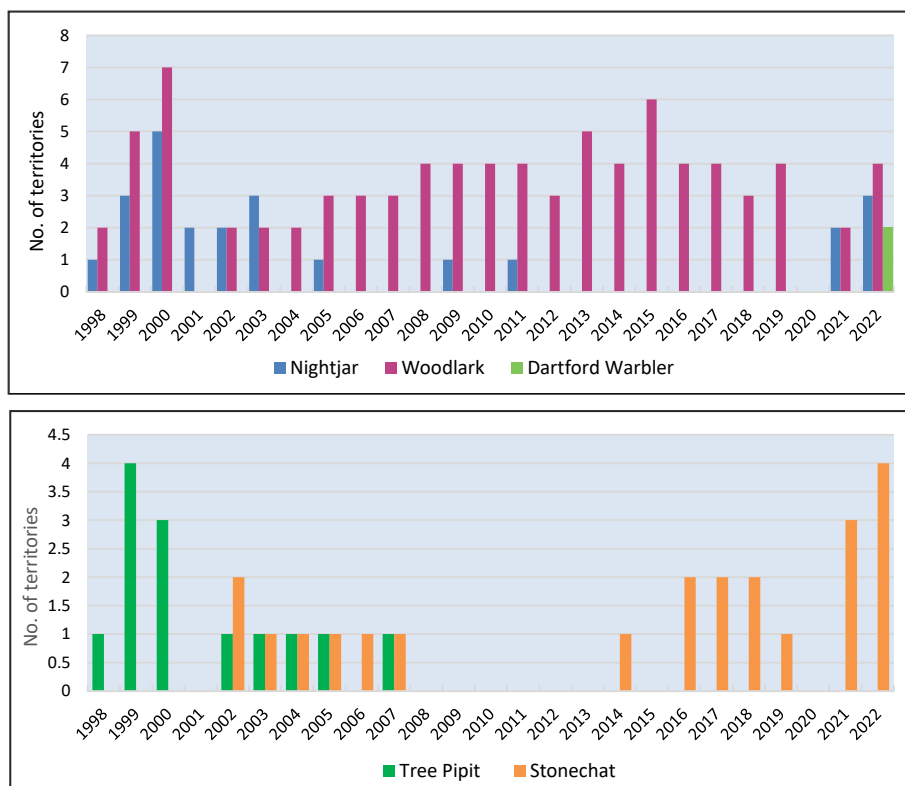
**Coates Common/Lords Piece.**

Area 89.7 ha. Conservation status: SSSI. Ownership: Barlavington Estate. Underlying geology: Folkestone Sands.



**Figure 33.** Lords Piece is principally grazed and mowed low to encourage Field Crickets. (above); and the wood pasture at Coates Common (below)

There are two distinct areas; Lords Piece, which is fenced (sometimes grazed) and principally managed for the re-introduction and establishment of the field cricket programme and to the south-west separated by a road the wooded pasture/scrub of Coates Common. The former was, due to massive clearance and subsequent very short mowing together with it being a favoured dog walking area, poor for heath species but as the heath has been allowed to mature in places the habitat has improved in recent years.



**Figure 34.** Numbers of territories of the five priority species recorded at Coates/Lords Piece.

The bare areas and low sward of Lords Piece have encouraged a stable Woodlark population whilst Stonechat numbers have recently improved with four in 2022. In 2021 Nightjar returned and in 2022 Dartford Warbler was recorded for the first time.

Common Whitethroat, Stock Dove, Green Woodpecker and Great Spotted Woodpecker are the most regularly recorded of the non-priority species and Woodcock irregularly. A surprise in 2022 was of four Reed Bunting territories.

## Species trends summary

Overall, the Nightjar has the most positive increasing trend on the WHBBS sites with an increase of 104% and an outstanding 18 recorded on Ambersham/Heyshott Commons in 2022. Unfortunately, by contrast Tree Pipit, the biggest declining UK sub-Saharan migrant species is down -81% and worse than the -56% reported by BTO BirdFacts (2022) for England. Both Dartford Warbler and Stonechat suffered collapses during the 2009-2011 severe winter spells (also in the 2013 spring for Stonechat) but since that period both are recovering strongly. The overall Woodlark population is stable and had a strong 2022 performance returning almost to the highest count recorded at the outset of the survey. Although there is no room for complacency it appears, particularly over the last 5-year period of the survey, that other than Tree Pipit, there can be some optimism for four of the priority species. There is little doubt that such a trend will be dependent on continuing effective management and climatic conditions. A harsh winter will certainly negatively affect Dartford Warbler and Stonechat.

There was sufficient data to additionally produce reliable trend assessment graphs for eight of the non-priority species. Green Woodpecker (WHBBS +32%, BirdFacts UK -12%), Redstart (WHBBS +400%, BirdFacts UK -9%) and Linnet (WHBBS +38%, BirdFacts UK -12%) fared well, bucking the UK negative trends. Also in positive territory were Stock Dove and Whitethroat, both being well ahead of the BirdFacts UK figures, but Great Spotted Woodpecker was lagging (BirdFacts UK +99%, WHBBS +60%). Disappointing was the WHBBS decline of Yellowhammer, -27% against BirdFacts UK figure of -19%. The WHBBS Woodcock result was -31% and although there is no direct comparison available the data from 1990 and 2010 UK surveys indicate a similar decline.

## Distribution of priority species summary

To assess the latest population distribution of the priority species an analysis was undertaken of the last five years of the survey and separately 2022. The results show that the bulk of the population of the priority species occupied a limited number of heathlands with Ambersham & Heyshott Commons having 21%, Black Down 20.5%, and Iping 18%. Consequently, these three heathlands held almost 60% of the priority species population. Of the others only Lavington Common/Plantation/Duncton reached double figures at 10%. Obviously, site size influences numbers yet with less than half the area Iping almost matches Black Down and Ambersham for numbers. Particularly disappointing is Woolbeding at 8% as this is not only a large heath at 190 ha, but well managed. The 106 ha of Lynchmere & Stanley Commons at under 3% is another heathland that appears to have unrealised potential and requires urgent maintenance work. The 2022 results largely bear out the five-year averaged results but encouragingly some of the smaller heaths reported better figures reducing the three prime sites to approximately 47% of the total.

## Conclusion

This survey has shown strong positive trends for four of the five key heathland species and is a tribute to all the organisations and individuals who have worked, largely successfully, to maintain the heathland sites in positive conservation condition. The 25 years of this survey have coincided with not just the realisation of the importance of heathland and its diverse taxa communities, but also funding was found to undertake extensive restoration and detailed management work. The WHBBS heathlands are diverse in size, elevation, habitat mosaic, and management regimes, as a consequent the survey results have highlighted differences between their individual avian populations and distribution. Not surprisingly the larger well managed sites tend, although not exclusively, to hold the greatest abundance but even between these sites there are differences, some of which are difficult to explain. For instance, why should Woolbeding, a well-managed site

comprising an apparently ideal habitat of extensive open heather and gorse have such low Dartford Warbler numbers compared with Black Down, another high heath, or the nearby Ambersham/Heyshott and Iping heaths? The same question can be asked of Lynchmere and Stanley Commons. Issues such as disturbance, climate, pollution or possibly in the Tree Pipits case migration/wintering problems are likely to be part of the answer.

There are constant surveyors' comments about the overuse of these sites for leisure activities, particularly dog walkers who do not keep their dogs under control. Such pressure has an adverse effect on both numbers and breeding productivity of the key species (see for instance Burton 2009), but it is extremely challenging to collect direct evidence of such adverse impacts of disturbance. Yet counter intuitively a site such as Iping, which is an extremely popular dog walking site and crisscrossed with pathways, has currently, despite these obvious negative aspects, excellent population numbers and diversity of species.

A recent experiment within the SDNPA Heathland Reunited project area has been undertaken in Hampshire and another in Ashdown Forest, called SANGS (Suitable Alternative Natural Green Spaces) their purpose is to provide areas specifically for recreation to relieve pressure on heathland. On West Sussex heaths this may not be feasible due to fragmentation and size, but it is interesting that certain heaths and parts of heathland are more popular than others. For example, Lords Piece is fully fenced, and despite being regularly grazed is a very popular dog walking venue particularly a perimeter path, as is the southern grass area of Chapel Common. Perhaps this behaviour could be utilised to encourage certain areas or paths to be used, releasing pressure on an entire heathland or an ecologically important area within a heathland.

Whether privately or conservation owned these heaths will only continue to remain in favourable condition with funding and knowledgeable managers overseeing contractors, and willing staff and volunteers. The practical site knowledge gained by the WHBBS surveyors together with the data has enabled us to often assist both site managers and owners with their management work. Let us hope that the difficult financial situation being experienced at the time this paper is written will alleviate sufficiently to enable the necessary funding to be released to ensure the long-term future of these beautiful and ecologically valuable places.

## Acknowledgements.

My thanks to the current surveyors Jonathan Mycock, Andie Timms, Matt Eade, Paul Matson, Dr Alan Buckle, Alan Hines and Mark McManus, and of course to those of the past, either retired or sadly no longer with us, for all their hard work (some for over 20 years), and for putting up with me chasing them annually for results. Thanks also to Colin Carre, Project Manager, the South Downs National Park Authority for his helpful advice, the SOS scientific papers editor Ken Smith for his guidance and patience, and the RSPB for providing the maps for the survey.

## References

- Balmer, D.E., Gillings, S., Caffrey, B.J., Swann, R.L., Downie, I.S., Fuller, R.J. (2013) Bird Atlas 2007–11: The Breeding and Wintering Birds of Britain and Ireland. British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford.
- BTO (2023) BirdFacts: profiles of birds occurring in the United Kingdom. BTO, Thetford. (<https://www.bto.org/birdfacts>, accessed on 09/03/2023).
- Burton, N.H.K. 2009. Reproductive success of Tree Pipits *Anthus trivialis* in relation to habitat selection in conifer plantations. *Ibis* 151: 361–372.

Crabtree, H. 2021. Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) population trends in Sussex 1994-2020. Sussex Bird Report 74 (2021), Sussex Ornithological Society .

Harris, S.J., Massimino, D., Balmer, D.E., Kelly, L., Noble, D.G., Pearce-Higgins, J.W., Woodcock, P., Wotton, S. & Gillings, S. (2022) The Breeding Bird Survey 2021. BTO Research Report 745. British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford.

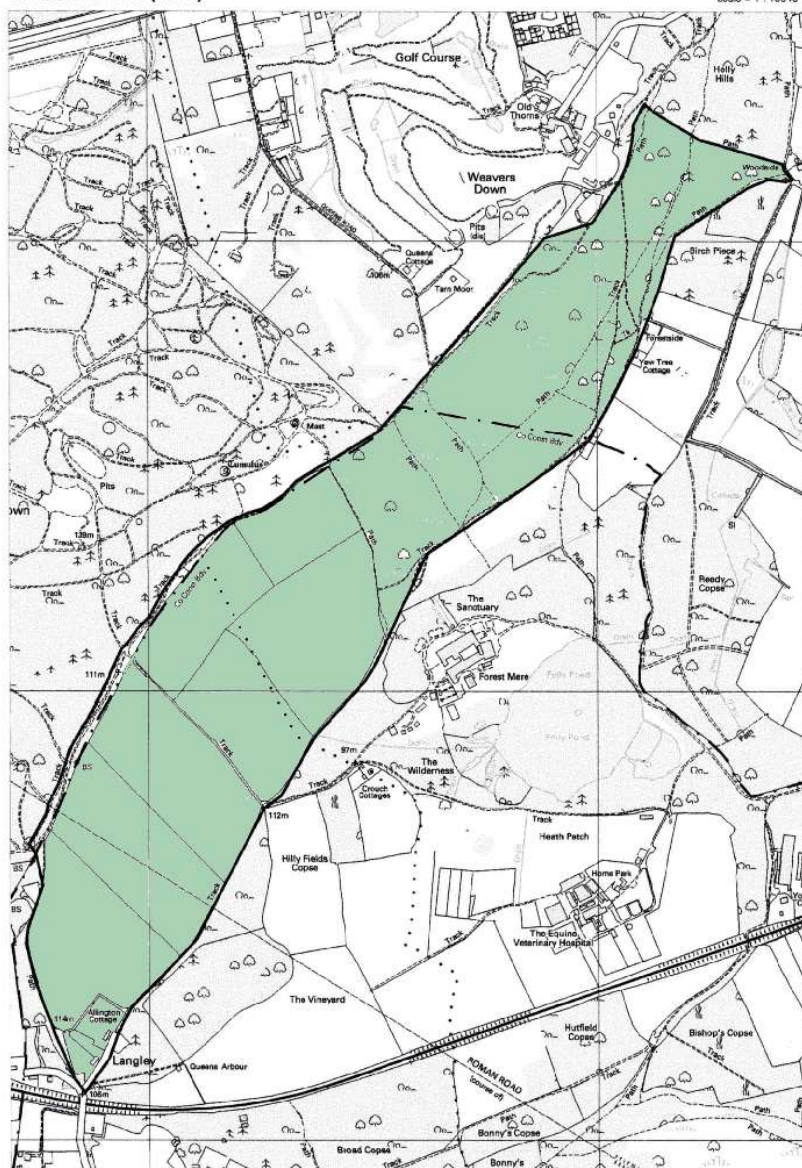
Perry, A. 2016. Wealden Heaths Breeding Bird Survey (West Sussex) 1998-2015: site descriptions, breeding survey results and notes on wintering birds. In Sussex Bird Report No. 68, 2015. Sussex Ornithological Society.

Stanbury, A., Eaton, M., Aebischer, N., Balmer, D., Brown, A., Douse, A., Lindley, P., McCulloch, N., Noble, D., and Win I. 2021. The status of our bird populations: the fifth Birds of Conservation Concern in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man and second IUCN Red List assessment of extinction risk for Great Britain. *Brit. Birds* 114: 723-747. Available online at <https://britishbirds.co.uk/content/status-our-bird-populations>.

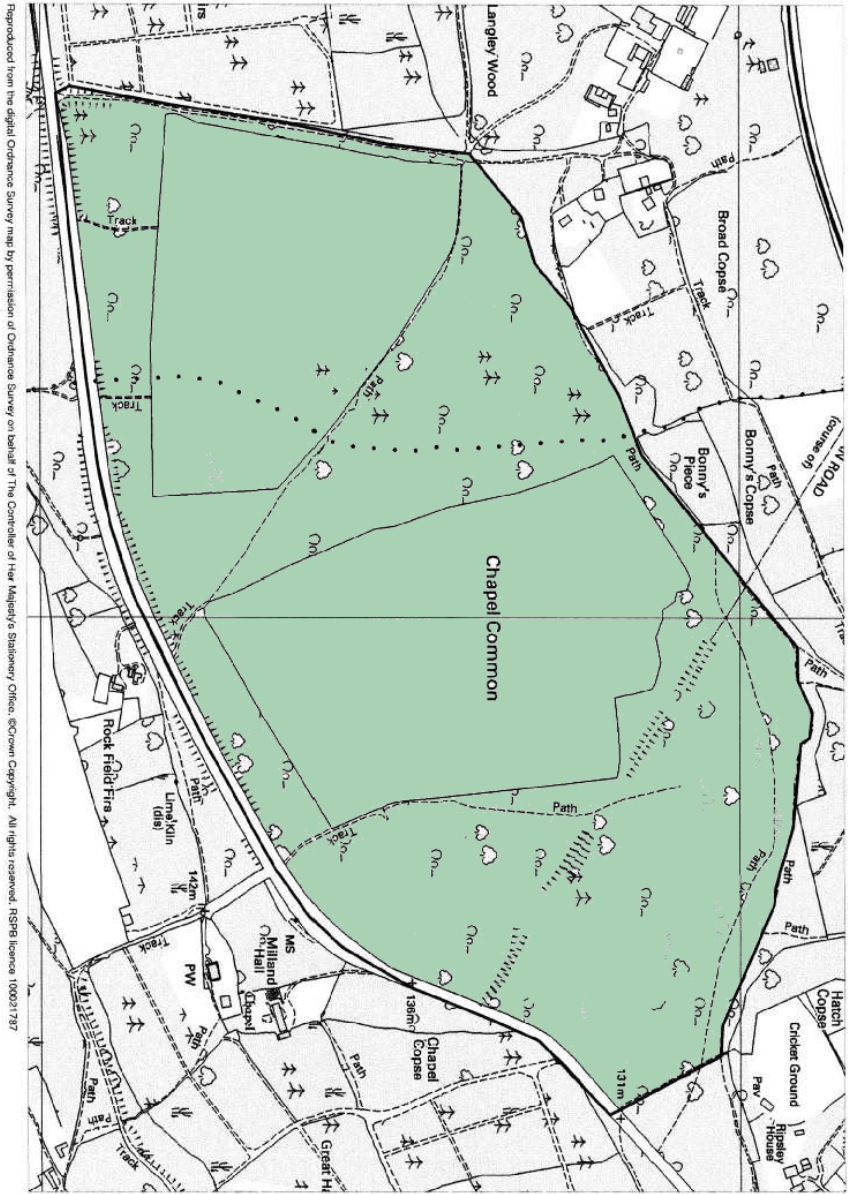
Thomas, A. (ed) 2014. *The Birds of Sussex*. BTO Books, Thetford.

## Appendix - maps of the individual heaths

### Weavers Down (WS1)

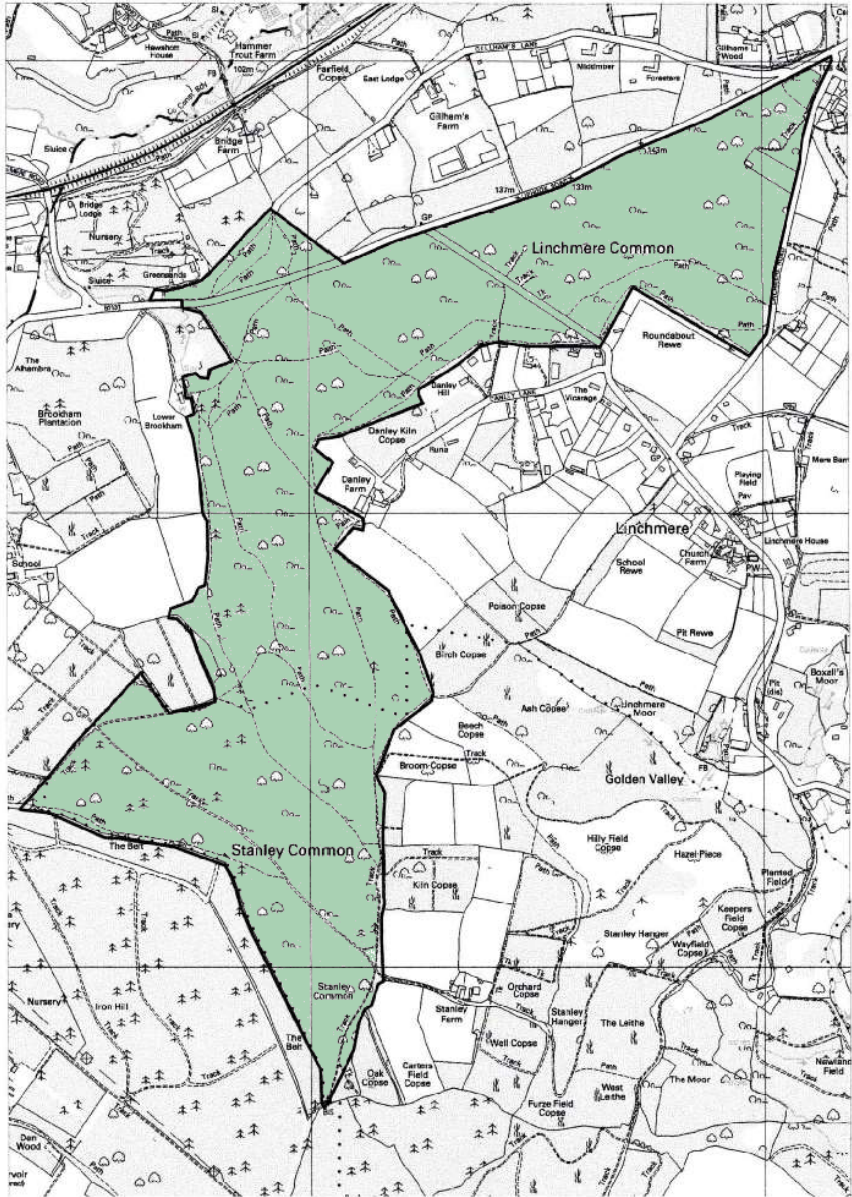


Chapel Common (WS3)



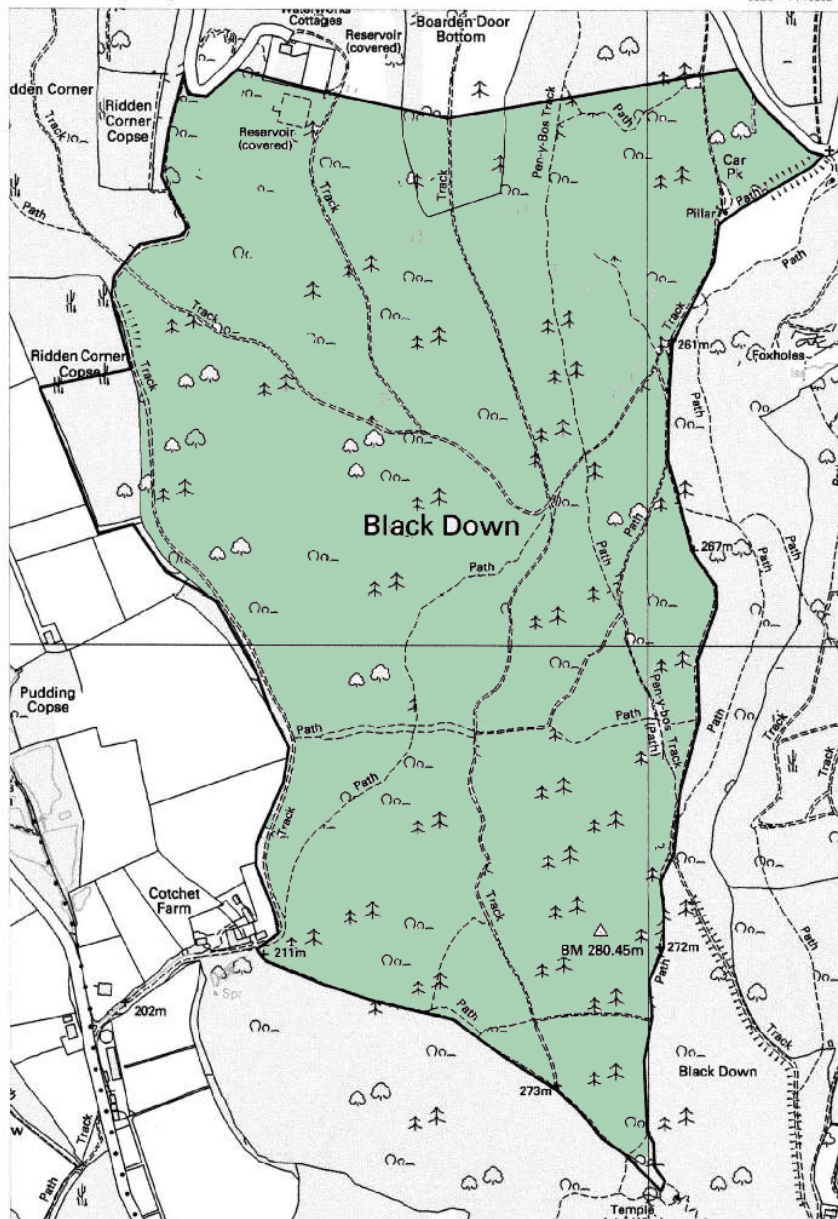
Linchmere and Stanley Commons (WS4)

scale = 1 : 20966



**Blackdown (WS5)**

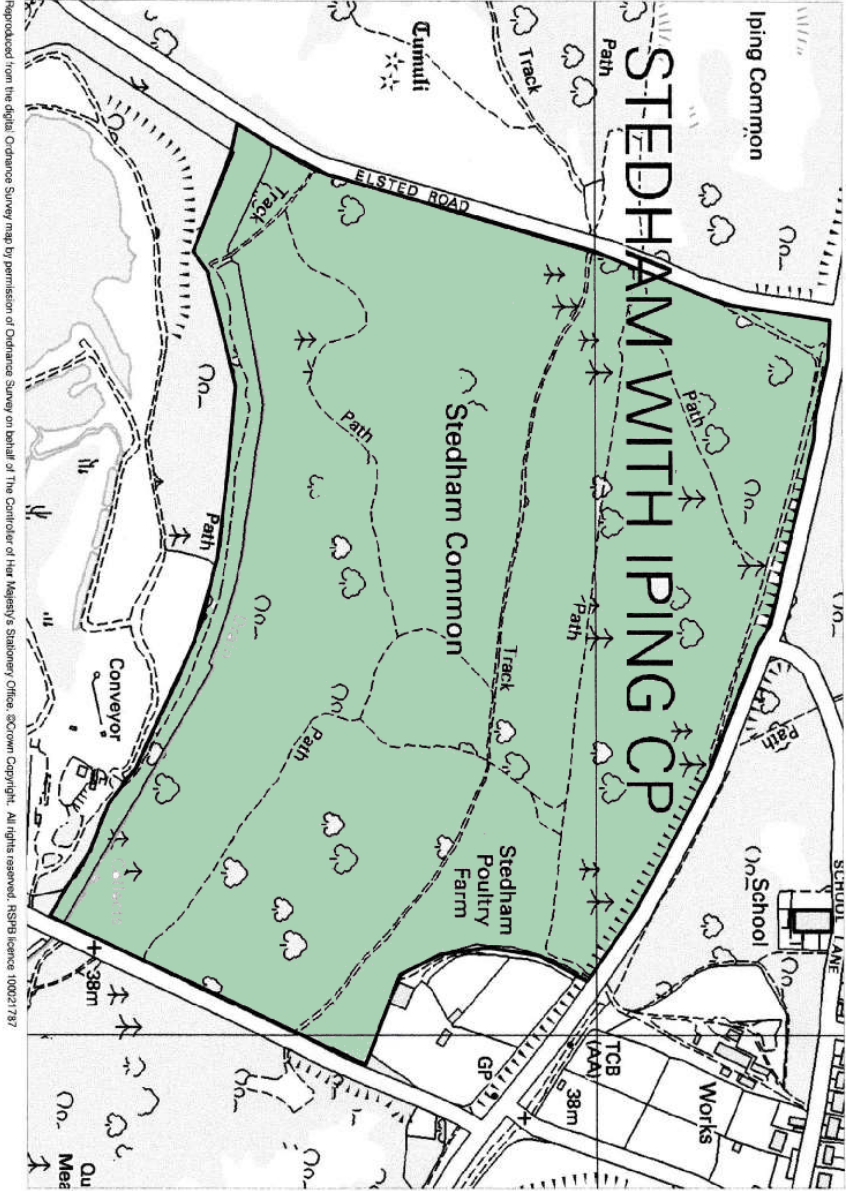
Scale = 1 : 10852



Iping Common (WS10)



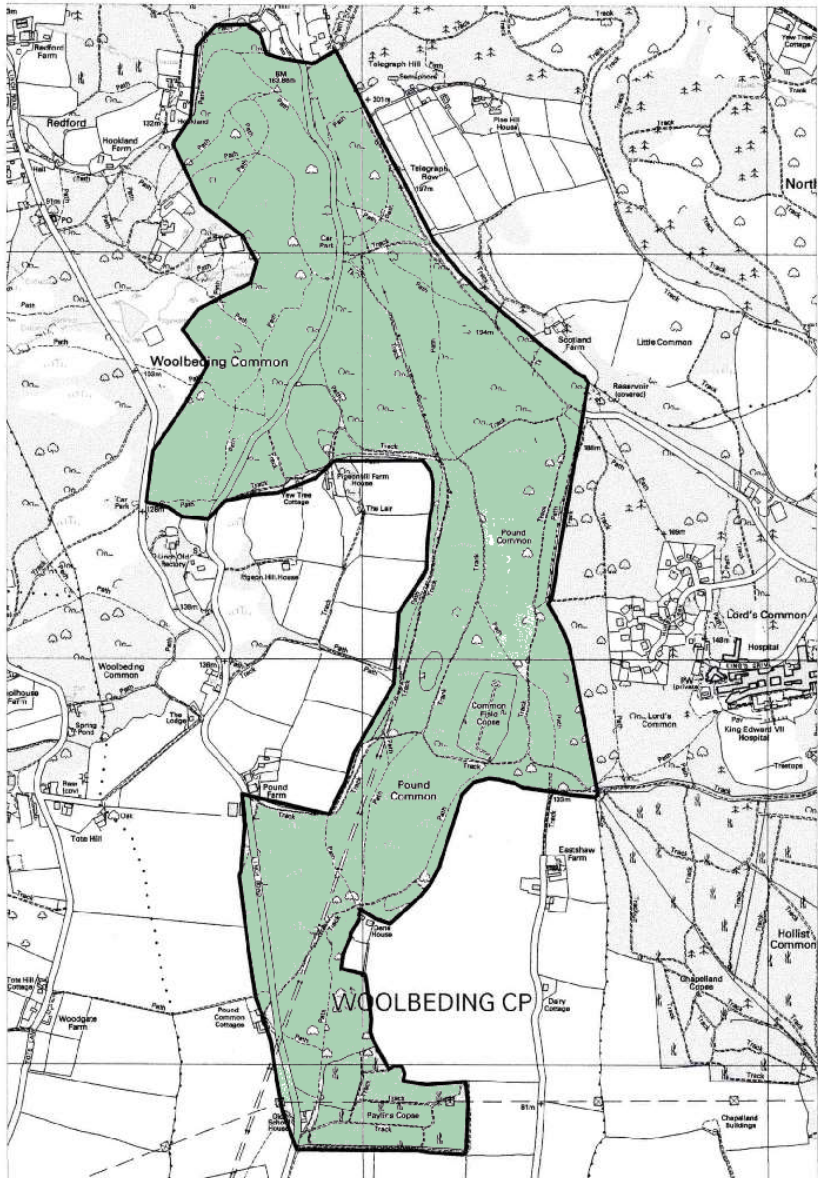
Stedham Common (WS11)



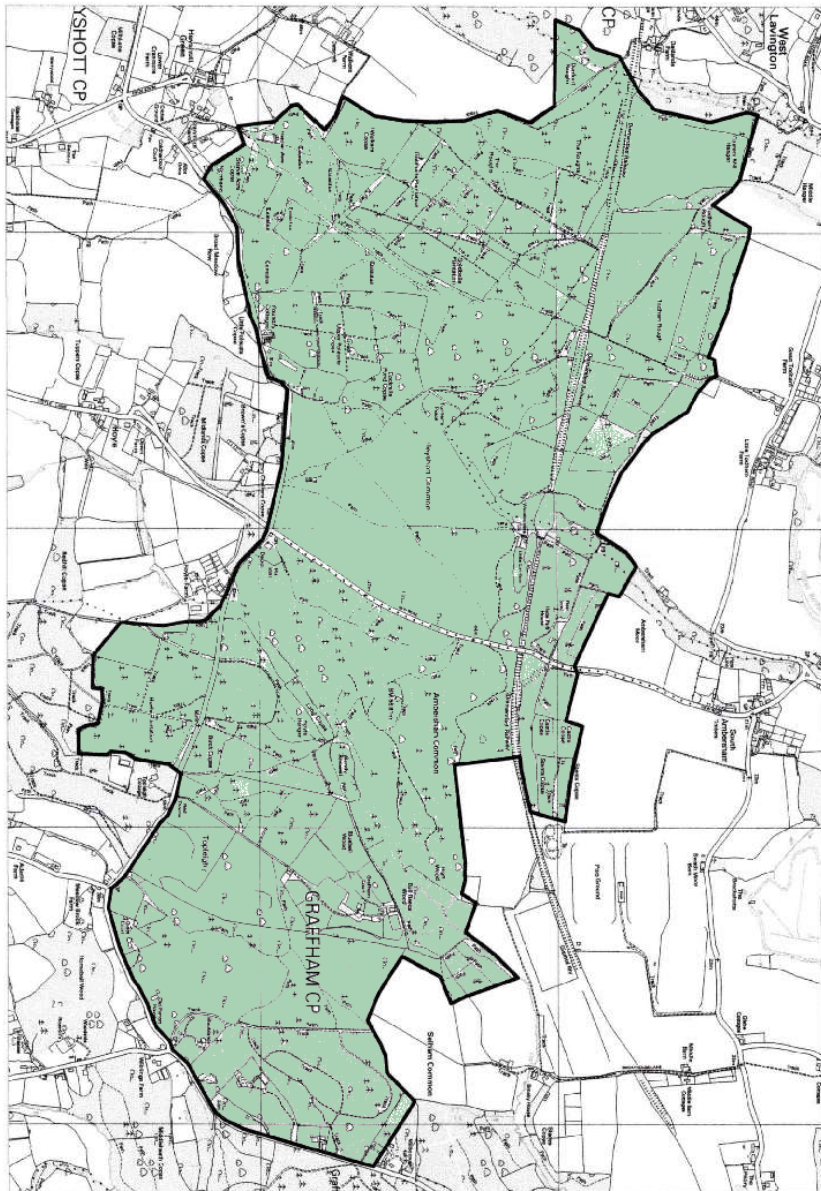
Reproduced from the digital Ordnance Survey map by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved. OS/PA licence 100021782

## Woolbeding Common (WS12)

scale = 1 : 19086



### Ambersham & Heyshott Commons (WS17)



Reproduced from the digital Ordnance Survey map by permission of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office. ©Crown Copyright. All rights reserved. RSPB licence 100021787



**Coates Common & Lord's Piece (WS19), also showing Broad Halfpenny**

