

The Vertebrate Fauna of The Stiperstones: an annotated checklist

The recording area: extent and habitats

This checklist draws together all the records we can find of vertebrates on the hill ridge of The Stiperstones in south Shropshire (running from Black Rhadley in the south through to The Hollies in the north), together with the southern outliers known as Heath Mynd and Cefn Gunthly. The shared geology, topography and vegetation of this area make it appropriate to treat it as a single ecological unit (figure 1). In the checklist the recording area is referred to as 'the site'.

This is essentially a checklist of the vertebrates occurring in the upland heathland that embraces the rocky ridge. However, in places grassland, wet flushes and woodland occupy the flanks of the hill, and their fauna is included because this account concerns a topographical unit rather than a single habitat. The Stiperstones and The Hollies Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI, it is also a Special Area of Conservation) encompasses all of these habitats and embraces all of the National Nature Reserve (NNR). The SSSI is essentially then the core of the recording area, with Heath Mynd and Cefn Gunthly included so as to cover the whole of the ecological unit.

In a number of cases observers may have used 'Stiperstones' as a shorthand term to include the flanks of the hill outside the SSSI. It is not now possible to disentangle these records from those relating to land within the site boundary. However, where, for whatever reason, records are included despite coming from adjacent areas, this is made clear in the annotations.

The records and the recorders

Records come from a wide range of sources and cover the period up to the end of 2009. All but a few of the records refer to birds. The earliest are from county-wide accounts published between 1879 and 1908 by Eyton, Rocke, Beckwith and Forrest (see references). Observers were few in this period and information was limited. As a consequence perhaps, each of these authorities relied on his predecessor, sometimes appearing to repeat previous statements of status without further information being available in corroboration.

The next account was not until 1964 (Rutter *et al.*). This was a genuine exercise in reviewing anew the status of birds in the county, with summaries given in relation to eight recording areas – The Stiperstones falling within what are described as the 'West Central Hills'. It was followed in 1992 by an atlas of breeding birds (Deans *et al.*). Forrest's and Eyton's accounts cover vertebrates as a whole, the other authors write of birds only. By contrast Russell's review of 1970/71 is just of mammals.

It is only very rarely that these accounts refer specifically to The Stiperstones, but they do provide indications of the likely status of key species at particular periods.

The annual reports of the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club for the years 1900-1960 have been looked through for records of vertebrates including upland heathland bird species, as have the annual reports of the Shropshire Ornithological

Society for the years to Over and above this the Society has kindly made available records from onwards from its data base.

It is only over recent decades that any part of Shropshire has been well recorded, even by bird watchers. But it seems that up until the middle decades of the twentieth century The Stiperstones was hardly worked at all, at least by those who contributed records to the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club. Why was this? Relative remoteness and poor access will have been factors, coupled perhaps with an aversion to the mining activities that had led to the area being described by Magdalene Weale in 1935 as 'the land of dereliction'. It is fair to say too that The Stiperstones had less to offer than either The Long Mynd, with its wider range of habitats, or the mountains and coast of Wales. Furthermore some of the birds such as Curlew and Whinchat, which observers nowadays have to come to hills like The Stiperstones to see, were formerly much more widespread and did not require an excursion.

Nevertheless, from the 1940s onwards, The Stiperstones attracted some able and diligent observers, notably Ken Stott, Frank Gribble, Jack Sankey, Tony Cross and Mark Evans. Not all of them visited frequently but they made sufficient records to start to fill out the picture. Other sources are more incidental in nature, and records have come by word of mouth, from memoirs, poetry and literature. These less conventional sources are made clear in the annotations.

The NNR was declared in 1982 but not wardened until 1986. From this point onwards one of the co-compilers of this checklist (TW), who has wardened the NNR since then, maintained a record of all observations that he found noteworthy, though he established no clear criteria to define what observations were entered into his notebooks. His colleague, David Hatfield, who worked on The Stiperstones NNR between 19... and 20... also kept records, but sadly only those for the years to have survived. It should be noted however that neither observer was ever on site day in, day out, as they were managing other sites as well, and TW has spent progressively less time on the ground over the years.

For these, and for previous recorders too, the core area for observations has always been what is currently the NNR. Records for areas further to the south, particularly Heath Mynd and Cefn Gunthly, are very sparse.

We have endeavoured to make this checklist as complete as possible and we hope that any omissions or errors will be brought to our attention. Above all, we hope that this list will be taken up as something of a challenge, leading to new records, the plugging of gaps and the need to revise accounts of status in the light of further survey and recording. We encourage observers to keep us abreast of new records and to submit them to the relevant county recorder. There is a lot more to learn. This is true of the birds but particularly so of the mammals.

Changes in habitat and wildlife management

This checklist covers a period of some 170 years during which there have been significant changes in land use, wildlife habitats and wildlife management. We can

only speculate as to how the area looked when T C Eyton was making his 'attempt to ascertain the fauna' of the county. The ridge of The Stiperstones was doubtless heather-clad at that time, as now. It will have been grazed and the surrounding land farmed, indeed the nineteenth century was a time of agricultural 'improvement'. It seems unlikely however that this will have had a major impact on the many areas of wet and awkward terrain immediately surrounding the ridge. Nevertheless more land was being enclosed and small-holdings becoming established quite high up the hill as the lead mines became increasingly busy, reaching their zenith in the 1870s. From these small-holdings cottagers will have sent out their livestock to graze and gone out themselves to harvest wood for their fires, bracken for use as animal bedding, wild fruits for eating and sale, and rabbits, and any other edible quarry, for the table. This was the time too when the hill will have been managed intensively for Red Grouse with, one supposes, an active burning regime and rigorous control of all potential predators, both birds and mammals. It seems likely that there will have been few trees and little in the way of scrub, but extensive areas of open habitat for Red Grouse, Skylarks and Meadow Pipits.

It seems that the Gatten Plantation to the east of the summit of The Stiperstones was planted with conifers in the 1870s; though prior to that it may have had some deciduous tree cover. Big Wood, on the same aspect but below Nipstone Rock may date from earlier than this. It is still present on a photograph taken from the top of Black Rhadley Hill and used on the front cover of the *Shropshire Magazine* **check date and title** in the 1960s. But otherwise this was then a virtually tree-less landscape. Importantly too it appears seamless, with the heather of the ridge extending downhill below its present confines, seeming to grade imperceptibly into rough grazing and marsh.

The decades up to the 1930s were ones of agricultural depression, and this will presumably have led to a relaxation in management of marginal land such as that surrounding The Stiperstones. There is a hint of this in H W Timperley's account of 1947 where he refers to the valley between The Long Mynd and The Stiperstones as a 'Curlew place', one 'that man can now scarcely hold for his cultivation'. By contrast, the post-war decades were ones of accelerating agricultural change with mechanisation and financial incentives leading to extensive drainage, ploughing, soil improvement and re-seeding. Green pastures replaced rough grazing and wet flush, marching uphill right to the rockiest and steepest of terrain. This will have impacted significantly on the wildlife of the heathland fringe, notably Curlew and Snipe, amphibians and reptiles and on Red Grouse too.

Ken Stott (2008) recalls the area 'between the Bridges and Gatten Plantation ... which contained many areas of rough marshy ground' being ploughed up and re-seeded 'just after the War'. He, like Timperley, had known this as prime Curlew ground. What were apparently rough heathery and gorsy grazings at The Knolls were improved in the 1960s and 1970s fragmenting the continuous run of unimproved ground along the spine of the hill. And what was reportedly a fine area of wet heathy ground immediately below what is now the NNR car park was drained and ploughed in 1982. Agricultural intensification will have led to significant increases in livestock numbers in areas surrounding the site. Within the site itself numbers appear to have reached a low ebb in the 1980s but have risen since.

The 1960s and '70s was a time of upland afforestation too and The Stiperstones was not exempt, with the Gatten Plantation re-planted after lying silviculturally fallow for some years, and conifers being planted on high quality heathland around Nipstone, The Rock and Rock Farm. The impact on heathland wildlife will have been considerable. The early growth phases of these plantations may have increased the numbers of upland edge species, but in the longer term these and the heathland specialists will have been the losers. These losses will not have been adequately offset by the increase in what is, generally speaking, the relatively common and sparse wildlife of conifer plantations.

So up until the 1990s the net of agriculture and forestry closed tighter and tighter around the hill, but in 1998 a project was launched which has sought to reverse this trend. *Back to purple: conserving and restoring The Stiperstones* has to date seen the felling of some 70 hectares of conifer plantations and much of this ground is being successfully restored to upland heathland. Alongside this the Shropshire Hills Environmentally Sensitive Area and, more recently, Environmental Stewardship, has had some success in arresting the trend of agricultural improvement and initiating wildlife friendly management .

The Stiperstones attracted tourists and day-trippers throughout the twentieth century but numbers increased considerably post-war. By contrast, the use of the hill for grouse shooting declined as the century progressed, with a reduction in burning management too. Countrywide the numbers of gamekeepers decreased markedly from the First World War onwards and this, together with legislation to protect wildlife, led to a progressive relaxation of pressure on predatory species, particularly as the illegal use of poisons waned. These trends have certainly been reflected in Shropshire and the marked increase in predators on and around The Stiperstones is a consequence.

Surveys

Annual spring counts of calling male Red Grouse have been carried out on the NNR since 1989 and post-breeding counts since 1993. Since 2002 a Breeding Bird Survey has been completed annually on the NNR following British Trust for Ornithology methodology.

A survey of the 'specialist' breeding birds of the upland heathland of the NNR was carried out in 1995/6 (Cross & Moscrop 1996). Further surveys of these birds were undertaken from 2002 to XXX both on the NNR and all the other upland heathland areas (Smith 2003 *et seq*). From 1999 to 2002 the colonisation by birds of the Gatten Plantation following felling was monitored (Turner 2002).

Records for the years 1985-1990 submitted for inclusion in 'An Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Shropshire' (Deans *et al* 1992) and for the current county atlas of breeding and wintering birds, 2007-2011 have been included.

There have been no surveys involving reptiles, fish or mammals but there has been an outline one of amphibians (Dobbs 2009).

Arrangement of the list

Sequence and nomenclature are as follows:

Birds: 'The British List' (British Ornithologists' Union 2009), using the vernacular names as given in that list.

Mammals: Harris & Yalden (2008)

Fish, amphibians and reptiles follow conventional nomenclature.

Acknowledgements

We owe thanks to all those who have observed and noted the vertebrate fauna of The Stiperstones over the years on whose records this checklist depends. We would like to acknowledge in particular

The Checklist

Abbreviations:

CSVFC = Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club

Fish

The study area includes little in the way of running water and most of the few tiny pools are ephemeral. No survey has been undertaken and the only reports are anecdotal. These are of Brown Trout *Salmo trutta* in the lower part of Perkins Beach (just off the SSSI) and, prior to drainage, in a stream that drained the field below the NNR car park at The Knolls.

Amphibians

Common Frog *Rana temporaria*

Encountered from time to time across the site, though there are no records from the top of the ridge. They spawn in most, but not all, areas of standing water.

Common Toad *Bufo bufo*

Encountered less frequently and there is no record of spawning.

Palmate Newt *Triturus helveticus*

In April 2009 specimens were found in the pool above The Knolls (compartment 21b) and two pools below Shepherd's Rock (compartment 43b) (Dobbs 2009).

Reptiles

Common Lizard *Zootoca vivipara*

Seen frequently on and adjacent to the heathland. No survey has been conducted and it is not known whether they are present in all habitats and at all elevations.

Slow-worm *Anguis fragilis*.

1904: three found, Snailbeach

Occurs in gardens in Perkins Beach but there are no records from the site itself.

Grass Snake *Natrix natrix*
One in Perkins Beach in 1979 (Evans 1983)

Adder *Vipera berus*
TW has never seen one or heard of any being seen over the years since 1986.
However ...

Birds

Where chroniclers of the birds of Shropshire have given an indication of the status of a species on The Stiperstones, or the area within which it lies, this is quoted or summarised, but such indications are often lacking.

Mallard

Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus*
Rutter 1964: 'The main localities are the Longmynd and Stiperstones and birds are seen here regularly'

Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*:
Beckwith 1879: 'frequent on the Longmynds, the Stiperstones, the Clee Hills, the Black Hill, and the Clun forest.'
Forrest 1899: 'numerous in the southern, but rare in the northern parts of the county ... much more numerous fifty years ago than they are at present ... they are gradually decreasing in numbers'
Forrest 1908: 'rare in the northern part of the county but fairly common in the south, especially about Ludlow and Bishop's Castle'
Rutter 1964: 'it had been thought that the Black Grouse was extinct but there have been several reports in the last five years of birds on the Longmynd and Stiperstones, but efforts to confirm these have been unsuccessful'

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*
Rutter 1964: 'almost entirely absent' from the hill country

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*
Rutter 1964: 'Widely distributed throughout the country even on the hill country, where it is found in small numbers up to the 1,500 ft contour'

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*
Rutter 1964: 'A single bird was present at Linley Hill from November 1961 to May 1962 and again in October 1962. It was often in company with Buzzards and was seen by many observers'

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Rutter 1964: 'A 'ring tailed harrier' on the Stiperstones on 15 April 1962 ... probably of this species'

Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Forrest 1908: 'This fine bird was formerly very numerous in the county and bred regularly in the southern part, but it is about thirty years since any nest has been found there ... chiefly known as an autumn visitor.'

Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*:

Beckwith 1879: 'some years ago specimens were obtained near Ludlow, the Stiperstones Hill and Pontesbury'.

Forrest 1899: 'used to occur near Ludlow, Pontesbury and the Stiperstones'

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Merlin *Falco columbarius*

Beckwith 1879: 'breeding regularly on the Longmynds and Stiperstones Hill'

Beckwith 1887: 'still occasionally breeds on the hills and moorlands in south west Shropshire'.

Forrest 1908: 'breeds on the Longmynd and Stiperstones'

Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Peregrine *Falco peregrines*

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Rutter 1964: 'Found fairly commonly throughout the county in marshy areas, moors and sewage farms'

Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Forrest 1899: 'a rare visitor to Shropshire Moors on its spring and autumn migrations'

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Forrest 1899: 'numerous on our Shropshire moorlands'

Gulls

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Rutter 1964: 'an exceptional record was of eight flying over the Stiperstones on 12 October 1963'

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Owls

Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*

Beckwith 1879: 'Not unfrequent in summer, about high upland woods and moors'

Beckwith 1893: 'in the south the wooded hills and heathery moorland so well accord with the Nightjar's tastes, that it is very generally distributed.'

Forrest 1899: 'not uncommon in ferny glades in upland woods'

Forrest 1908:

Swift *Apus apus*

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

Beckwith 1879: 'a few are found in many parts of the county, though it is no where common'

Beckwith 1890: 'a rare and extremely local bird.'

Forrest 1899: 'occurs very sparingly throughout.'

Rutter 1964: 'local in small numbers in the south and west.'

Countrywide, numbers fluctuated considerably in the nineteenth century and the population was at a low ebb in the early twentieth century. It increased considerably from the 1920s to the 1950s but tailed off markedly thereafter with the cold winters of 1961/2 and 1962/3 accelerating a decline from which a recovery has yet to be made, although birds have re-colonised Staffordshire over recent years. The local situation may reflect these national trends. One was heard singing at the 'Gatten' on 19 April 1927 and 'above Snailbeach' on 14 April 1952. Gribble reported in 1961 that it 'nests at Lordshill', but his record of a bird in song between Linley Hill and Black Rhadley on 3 February 1962 is the last. Lordshill, on the edge of The Hollies, with its scattered trees and sometimes close-cropped turf on sloping ground, may well have provided good habitat. Perhaps Mary Webb heard them here, as the bird and its 'vacillating song' get several mentions in *Gone to Earth* (1917) which is set largely at this location.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*

Beckwith 1879: 'a common migrant, and quite as frequent in low rich meadows as where gorse or whin grows'

Forrest 1899: 'common in summer where gorse bushes re found, and on meadows along the Severn valley'

Rutter 1964: 'well distributed throughout ... though more common on the high ground'

Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus*

Beckwith 1879: 'common in summer on high open ground and moorland where gorse and heather abound.'

Forrest 1899: 'common in summer on moorlands, but not so plentiful as the Whinchat; a few stay with us through the winter in sheltered places'

Rutter 1964: 'as a breeding bird it has decreased considerably since the turn of the century ... breeding sparingly in the West Central Hills'

Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Beckwith 1889: 'a common visitor to the Stiperstones'

Rutter 1964: 'fairly common in the West Central Hills'

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus*

Beckwith 1887: 'very numerous on the Longmynds, the Stiperstones, and the hills round Bishop's Castle and Clun'.

Forrest 1899: 'breeds regularly on the Longmynd and hills on the Welsh border.'

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*
Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*
Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*
Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*
Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*
Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*
Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata*
Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*
Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*
Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*
Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*
Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*
Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*
Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*
Rutter 1964: '30-40, Stiperstones, 25 October 1959'
Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*
Great Tit *Parus major*
Coal Tit *Parus ater*
Willow Tit *Poecile montana*
Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*
Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*
Treetreeper *Certhia familiaris*
Jay *Garrulus glandarius*
Magpie *Pica pica*
Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*
Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Raven *Corvus corax*

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Siskin *Carduelis spinus*

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Lesser Redpoll *Carduelis cabaret*

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*

Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*

Yellow Hammer *Emberiza citronella*

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Mammals

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Forrest (1908) described the Red Squirrel as 'very plentiful in all our woods', indicating that it would have occurred round The Stiperstones; this was at a time when it was very abundant throughout the British Isles. According to Russell (1970/71) it was 'plentiful [in Shropshire] until 1946' but 'scarce' within a decade and, by 1970, restricted to 'a few pockets mainly in the south-west'; extinction will have followed soon thereafter.

Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*.

CSVFC recorded the arrival of the Grey Squirrel in Shropshire in 1930; this was in the Bridgnorth district. Russell (1970/71) stated that 'it was as late as 1953 before they became common everywhere'; presumably by then they had reached The Stiperstones but the date of their arrival is not recorded. Today

Hazel Dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*.

Field Vole *Microtus agrestis*.

Wood Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus*.

Common Rat *Rattus norvegicus*.

Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*.

Brown Hare *Lepus europaeus*.

Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus*.

Mole *Talpa europaea*.

Common Shrew *Sorex araneus*.

Bats

Fox *Vulpes vulpes*.

Badger *Meles meles*.

Otter *Lutra lutra*.

Stoat *Mustela erminea*.

Weasel *Mustela nivalis*.

Polecat *Mustela putorius*.

Forrest 1908: 'now practically extinct in the county'

Reeves' Muntjac *Muntiacus reevesi*.

European Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*.

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Check out Evans dissertation

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