

## KINGS END FARM, RICHBOROUGH, BIRD REPORT 2023

### EAST KENT WILDLIFE GROUP

#### INTRODUCTION

Volunteers from the East Kent Wildlife Group began surveying the bird population at Kings End Farm near Richborough, Sandwich in 2015. The first four years were primarily a gradual expansion of the nest-box scheme and mist-netting was started in 2019. The amount of time and effort devoted to this site has gradually increased. Nest boxes, targeting Stock Doves, Barn Owls, Little Owls, Kestrel, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Tree Sparrows, House Sparrows and Starlings have been put up in many sites with varying success. Mist-netting has taken place over many of the fields with a British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Winter Ringing Project (November to February) set up at the chalk store feeding station close to the cattle barns on the marsh. More recently, considerable effort has centred on monitoring the juvenile dispersal and autumn migration (July to October) wherever there have grown suitable crops such as those that are full of aphids for example. Throughout these years there has been an increasing amount of data collected for the national BTO Nest Record Scheme and this site is a productive site for nest records and nestlings ringed. Both data from boxes and open nests are recorded.

Most fields are put down to crops with the fields closest to the River Stour being grazed by cattle or sheep. The timings of grazing depend largely on the weather and the rate of grass growth. The cattle tend to be kept in barns during the winter. The grazing is carried out by a local farmer. An outbreak of blue-tongue disease may well influence the grazing regime in the future. There are wide strips of grass around the majority of the fields for wildlife. Field boundaries are almost entirely Common Reed-filled ditches with a few scattered trees and hedges. The fields closest to the farmhouse are more heavily planted with boundary trees and thick hedgerows. There is a wildflower meadow and a field left rough with considerable Bramble thickets and native wild herbage. Many of the fields are wet in winter with some large areas of standing water.

Electricity pylons cross mostly the grassland and can be a hazard to flying wildfowl. Most of the farm is within the Ash Level Kent Local Wildlife Site. There are substantial ornithological surveys carried out by National Grid – Non-breeding Bird Survey Report 2014-2015 (Richborough Connection Project) and Breeding Bird Survey Report 2014 (Richborough Connection Project).

The fields are conveniently numbered by the farm manager, Anthony Curwen to whom we are grateful for his permission to visit the site and carry out our studies. See Figure One. The meadow is field KE27 (called “Dogleg Meadow”) and the main ringing area (called “Downs Meadow”) is KE26. The cattle barns are at the southern end of KE14. We rarely visit east of the railway. The feeding station and BTO Winter Project site are named “Bird feeders”. The concrete access track (the Drove) is coloured grey and runs more or less through the middle. The majority of the farm is open and flat with little cover for nets. This restricts our netting and nest searching to the calmer days. We visit throughout the year but as close to daily as possible in the breeding season.

Figure One: Kings End Farm Field Map with Numbers

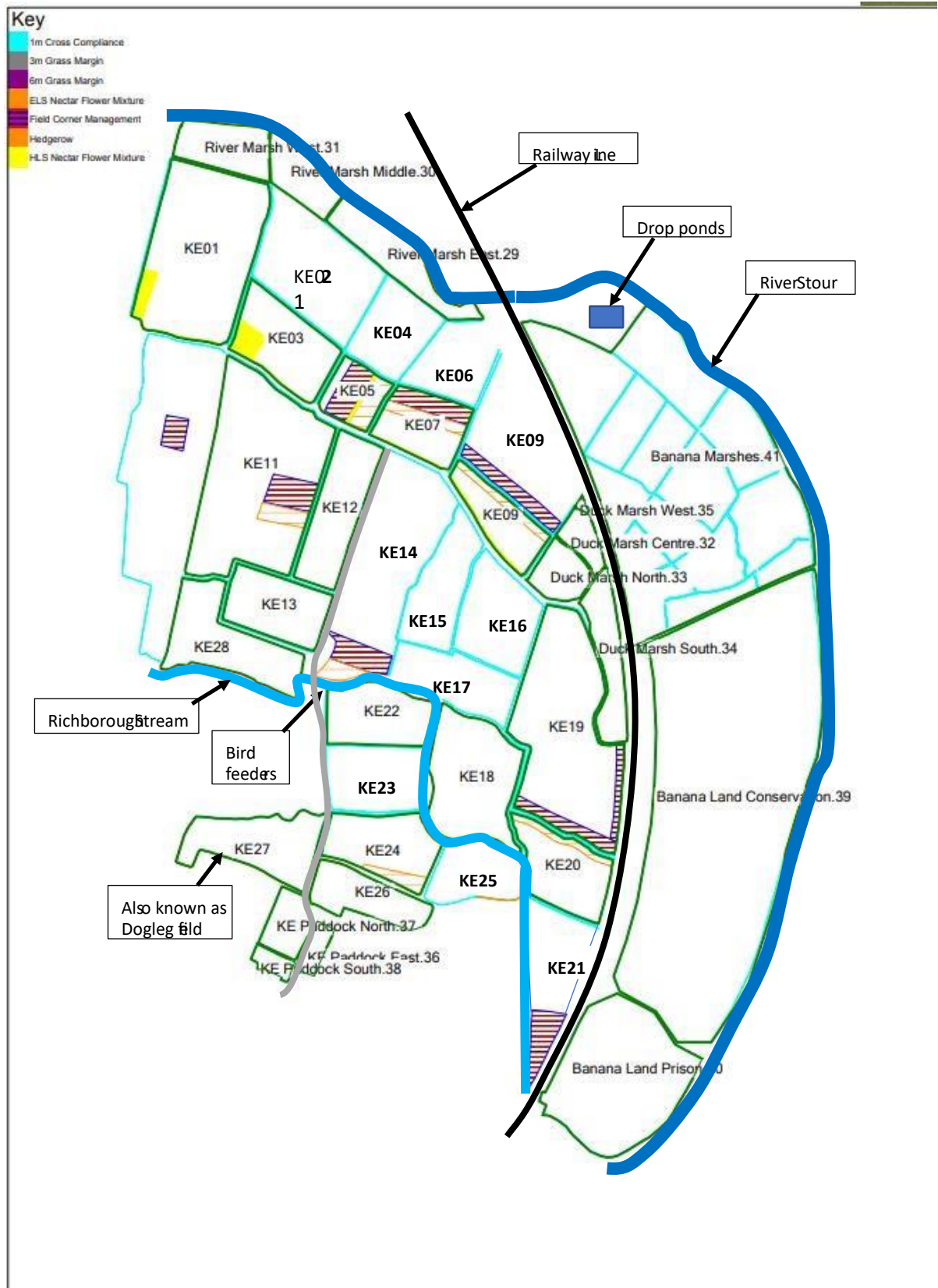


Table One: Kings End Farm Annual Ringing Totals

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Barn Owl		7	9		1			1		18
Blackbird					11	3	31	28	19	92
Blackcap					49	16	46	11	27	149
Blue Tit		5		4	33	61	69	78	62	312
Brambling							1		1	2
Carrion Crow							3			3
Cetti's Warbler					1	5	7	10	25	48
Chaffinch					4	16	36	19	26	101
Chiffchaff					169	21	153	41	142	526
Collared Dove				1			2	3	2	8
Duncock					3	16	18	19	30	86
Garden Warbler							3		5	8
Goldcrest					1			1	5	7
Goldfinch						209	130	218	153	710
Grasshopper Warbler									7	7
Gr't Spotted W'pecker							4	2	1	7
Great Tit					21	23	43	42	50	179
Greenfinch						31	13	11	37	92
House Martin								38		38
House Sparrow				3		90	53	79	43	268
Jay							1			1
Kingfisher									2	2
Lesser Redpoll									1	1
Lesser Whitethroat					1		1		9	11
Linnet							1	4	10	15
Little Owl								2		2
Long-tailed Tit					7	8	9	1	2	27
Meadow Pipit						2		3	1	6
Nightingale							1			1
Pied Wagtail							4	1	1	6
Redwing							2			2
Reed Bunting						6	7	5	55	73
Reed Warbler					35	21	221	32	448	757
Robin					4	18	27	29	22	100
Sedge Warbler					4	14	47		232	297
Skylark									2	2
Song Thrush							4	8	1	13
Sparrowhawk						2	1	1	1	5
Starling						13		3	5	21
Stock Dove	5	6	12	7	35	34	47	20	44	210
Stonechat							1	7		8
Swallow								18	1	19
Tree Pipit									1	1
Tree Sparrow						1	1		14	16
Turtle Dove									1	1
Whitethroat					4	1	5	2	111	123
Willow Warbler					6		4	1	98	109
Wren					2	11	15	9	35	72
Yellow Wagtail									2	2
Total	5	18	21	15	391	622	1011	747	1734	4564

2023 has set the scene for the future of our project. This site is close to our homes and this results in a lower carbon footprint than for our other main ringing sites. We hope to develop our ringing at KE26 in particular. Here, there is more shelter for our nets from wind and sun with a thick Hawthorn hedge along the southern side. To the north and west is a row of large, mature Willows. The grassland was not grazed in 2023 and we have cut paths through the vegetation to enable access. We have also cut net rides through the substantial Bramble thickets which should provide us with better netting and nest-finding options. These net rides should enable us to sample the migrants using the area from July to October. Of particular interest would be warblers that favour scrub such as Whitethroat, Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat.

We also plan to carry out a more extensive survey of KE26 in 2024. It is planned to set a series of small mammal traps on several nights during the year to establish a more comprehensive understanding of what might be there and in what density. Plants, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates (especially lepidoptera) will also be recorded. We will record more data that is accessible by loading our counts onto the BTO BirdTrack database as well as inputting our ringing and nest recording data onto the BTO DemOn programme. It is hoped to encourage some expert botanists to provide a more comprehensive list of the flora. This was the only Kent square not surveyed for the recent Atlas of Kent Flora and we hope that the Meadow and 26 would provide a suitable representation of the square.

#### RINGING REPORT

1734 birds were processed during the year of 42 species compared to 747 in 2022, and 1011 in 2021. This is the highest annual total for this site for the group. Turtle Dove, Kingfisher, Tree Pipit, Skylark, Yellow Wagtail, Grasshopper Warbler and Lesser Redpoll were all species ringed for the first time at this site in 2023. The BTO Winter Project was completed for 2022-2023 and these data will provide valuable regional patterns of population change within the national picture.

There were some particularly substantial totals achieved during the year. Certain warbler species were caught in exceptional numbers as indicated below –

Reed Warbler – 448 – Considerable effort was devoted to this specialist species. The availability of long stretches of Reed-filled ditches made searching for and finding nests a rewarding and valuable task. Following this, there were a large number of known-age chicks to be ringed. In addition to the effort put into nest-finding there were many fledged juveniles and adults to be caught between the bean crops and the reed-filled ditches. The bean crops were not sprayed with insecticides and consequently held a very large number of migrant and local insectivorous birds which were attracted to the prolific aphid and other invertebrate populations. One of the most pleasing aspects of this type of study is to subsequently encounter a juvenile that was ringed in the nest as a chick therefore confirming its survival.

Sedge Warbler – 232 – Few nests were found. The bean crop was of substantial benefit to this species and we were able to catch most of these within and beside the crop. This warbler is a Nationally declining species, so it was particularly rewarding to catch so many.

Garden Warbler – 5 – Although we only caught five, it was slightly surprising to catch this mainly woodland warbler out on the marshes. The bean crop clearly proved to be the difference.

Whitethroat – 111 – This is a species that has begun to recover after the near total crash many years ago. It is a scrubland specialist and the habitat at KE26 is ideal for it with the many clumps of Bramble providing ideal habitat. We will be able to gain a considerable amount of very useful data about age and sex composition of the population and it's health and breeding success for example. We hope to be able to develop the habitat at KE26 to support this species.

Lesser Whitethroat – 9 – Although this may seem a relatively low number, it is actually quite encouraging. KE26 will be a key factor in our ability to study this species in the future.

Grasshopper Warbler – 7 – This is a staggeringly good total for this enigmatic and scarce, skulking species. It provides good training opportunities in terms of identification and aging and is generally considered difficult to catch. The attraction of the invertebrate population of the beans proved the deciding factor.

Cetti's Warbler – 25 – This bird is a specialist of wetland habitats and a recent colonist from the continent. This must be one of the highest totals in the country. It is well worth the concentrated effort to catch so many and gain so much data about it. It is generally considered to be a relatively sedentary species. Amazingly, we caught an adult female carrying a Belgian ring which had been originally ringed as a juvenile female on the 26<sup>th</sup> August at West-Vlaanderen, Belgium. This was only the third UK recovery from that country and only the ninth from abroad.

Reed Bunting – 55 – Perfect habitat for this tricky species has enabled us to sample the population to a reasonable degree. It takes considerable effort to collect so much data and this total is quite pleasing.

There were several species that were caught in lower numbers than expected. Swallow and House Martin have had a recent crash in their population nationally and the low numbers here reflect that. The weather from September to the end of the year was very windy and this restricted the number of days suitable for netting at the farm to less than five.

It is hoped to continue the high level of ringing activity at Kings End Farm. It would be valuable to continue the BTO Winter Project for as many years as possible. The data collected for Goldfinch, Reed Bunting and House Sparrow in particular would be of importance at a national and regional level. The development of KE26 and its management and the ad hoc ringing which takes advantage of certain crop opportunities would be additionally valuable.

#### NEST RECORD REPORT

Considerable effort was made this year to find and study as many nests as possible, particularly Sarah Fawcett. Reed Warbler was selected for particular concentrated effort and this proved to be important. The Reed Warbler breeding habitat is entirely within the

established Common Reed growth and there is a great deal of linear habitat along the reedy ditches that form the boundaries of most fields. Training was given to two Environment Agency (EA) teams on the occurrence, location, timing and success of Reed Warblers that occupy a habitat of interest to the EA. The local Inland Drainage Board were found to be clearing the nesting habitat at a time when Reed Warblers were still nesting and having young chicks in the nest. This issue requires further examination.

Each visit to a nest is designed to collect information on the different stages of a breeding attempt. This would include the beginning of nest building, construction progress, the number of eggs (clutch size), the number of young (brood size), chicks ringed and a final outcome.

Table Two: Number of Nest Records per species in 2023 for Kings End Farm

Species	Grand Total
Stock Dove	40
Dunnock	2
Blackbird	5
Chaffinch	1
Starling	3
Great Tit	6
Linnet	3
Whitethroat	4
Skylark	1
Reed Bunting	4
Reed Warbler	67
Blue Tit	1
House Sparrow	6
Wren	1
Long-tailed Tit	1
Mute Swan	1
Coot	1
Moorhen	2
Song Thrush	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>150</b>

This is an impressive collection of records for one year at a single site. It represents an enormous amount of effort searching suitable habitat carefully. Finding nests is strictly controlled and has a comprehensive code of practice. Reed Warblers generally did fairly well with 22 of the nests studied successful. Stock Dove is an Amber listed species which uses our nest boxes in good numbers at Kings End farm and had at least 19 successful outcomes.

It is planned to repeat this survey in 2024.

Table Three: Number of Nestlings (Pulli) Ringed at Kings End Farm 2023

Species	Total
Dunnock	7
Stock Dove	40
Blackbird	4
Chaffinch	4
Starling	5
Great Tit	19
Linnet	9
Whitethroat	9
Skylark	2
Reed Bunting	11
Reed Warbler	144
Blue Tit	7
House Sparrow	16
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>277</b>

Enabling the birds to be ringed with a unique ring at the stage of nestling is particularly valuable as we know so much about the origin of the individual such as where and exactly when it was hatched. In some cases, we are even able to link it with one or both parents that are known and this can lead to detailed family histories being established.

The ability to ring pulli is subject to extensive training for an endorsement to a ringing permit and we have been able to deliver training. This will continue in future years as a valuable contribution to the BTO Ringing Scheme.



Reed Warblers nest full of chicks. Note how the nest is attached to the old stems of previous year's Reeds for strength. S Fawcett

## Kings End Farm Bird Recoveries and Controls to 2023

Inevitably, there are a number of exchanges between Sandwich Bay and Kings End Farm with large numbers of birds ringed at both sites. This is a reflection of the availability of licensed ringers rather than a pattern of bird migration. The three records of different species (Blackcap, Sedge Warbler and Chiffchaff) from Squire's Down, Dorset, is extraordinary given the large number of ringers in between the two sites. The number of foreign recoveries is very pleasing with two Belgian and one French records.

### Barn Owl

**Plucks Gutter, Kent**, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2019, adult female To- **KEF**, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2019, 27 days, 7 km, 123deg (ESE)

This is an unusual control for a potential breeding female to move so early. It does indicate that the Barn Owl population is capable of moving around the East Kent area at least.

### Blue Tit

**Sandwich Bay Estate, Kent**, 21 October 2018 To- **KEF**, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020  
Ring number S 407693 **KEF**, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2020  
**KEF**, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020  
**KEF**, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2022  
**KEF**, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2022  
**KEF**, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2023

This is the only Blue Tit control. It took well over a year to get here but has settled at KEF for at least three years. It is about five years old (1585 days) which is a good age for a Blue Tit.

### Great Tit

**Sandwich Bay Estate, Kent**, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2021 To- **KEF** 15<sup>th</sup> March 2022

### Blackcap

**Squire's Down, Dorset**, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2021 To- **KEF**, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2021, 7 days, 258 km, 83deg (E)

**Sandwich Bay Estate, Kent**, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2019 To- **KEF**, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2019, 1 day, 4km, 299deg (WNW)

**KEF**, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2021 To- **Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex**, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2022, 205 days, 65 km, 358deg (N)

Three Blackcap subsequent encounters is quite a reasonable return considering we didn't ring that many. One from Essex and one from Dorset indicates their wide-ranging movements.

### Reed Warbler

**KEF**, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2021 To- **Waterham, Kent**, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2022, 282 days, 25 km, 279deg (W)

**KEF**, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2023 To- **Sandwich Bay Estate, Kent**, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2023, 18 days, 3 km, 129deg (SE)

**KEF**, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2023 To- **Weatherlees Hill, Ebbsfleet, Kent**, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2023, 46 days, 2 km, 0deg (N)



KEF, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2023

To- **Reculver, Kent**, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2023, 48 days, 12 km, 309deg (NW)

Four relatively local records is perhaps a little disappointing considering the numbers we caught this year. More, however, will undoubtedly follow given that this species is now a priority.

### Sedge Warbler

**Squire's Down, Dorset**, 10<sup>th</sup> August 2021

To- **KEF**, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2021, 1 day, 258km, 83deg (E)

KEF, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2023

To- **Réserve du Massereau, Frossay, Loire-Atlantique, France**, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2023, 6 days, 506 km, 208deg, (SSW)

KEF, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2021

To- **Houtem (Veurne), West-Vlaanderen, Belgium**, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2021, 9 days, 94 km, 109 deg (ESE)

In contrast to the previous species, two foreign recoveries is very pleasing. It is a very good example juvenile dispersal once they become independent of the adults. This is another species drawn to the bean crop with its associated bountiful supply of invertebrates.

### Chiffchaff

**Squire's Down, Dorset**, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2019

To- **KEF**, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2019, 19 days, 258 km, 83deg (E)

**Treatment Works, Swindon**, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2019

To- **KEF**, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019 63 days, 219km, 98deg (E)

KEF, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2021

To- **Sandwich Bay Estate, Kent**, 23 March 2022, 167 days, 4 km, 119deg (ESE)

Two examples of wide-ranging juvenile dispersal and a migrant following a similar autumn and spring route. The Chiffchaff is generally a late autumn visitor to this area of the east coast.

### Cetti's Warbler

**West-Vlaanderen, Belgium**, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2022

To- **KEF**, , 4<sup>th</sup> August 2023, 343 days, 116 km, 288deg (W)

One of the groups most interesting controls. This a good record of what is generally considered to be a rather sedentary species. This an example of a continental juvenile dispersing to the UK. This was only the third UK recovery from Belgium ever, and only the ninth from abroad. This species, though not the easiest to catch, is clearly well worth the effort and we will continue to devote the time required.

### Chaffinch

**Sandwich Bay Estate, Kent**, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2022

To- **KEF** 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2022  
127 days, 5 km, 317deg (NW)

An interesting movement of a likely local bird to Sandwich Bay wintering here.

## **Goldfinch**

<b>Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020</b>	To- <b>KEF, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2022</b> 478 days, 59 km, 168deg (SSE)
<b>KEF, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2020</b>	To- <b>Minster, Kent, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2020,</b> 23 days, 4km, 0deg (N)
<b>KEF, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2021</b>	To- <b>Minster, Kent, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2021,</b> 28 days, 1km, 270deg (W)
<b>KEF, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2021</b>	To- <b>Sandwich Bay Estate, Kent, 3<sup>rd</sup> April</b> 2022, 133 days, 5 km, 137deg (SE)
<b>KEF, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021</b>	To- <b>Ramsgate, Kent, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022, 193</b> days, 3 km, 52deg (NE)
<b>KEF, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2023</b>	To- <b>Panshanger Lagoon, Hertfordshire,</b> 7 <sup>th</sup> December 2023, 324 days, 118 km, 299deg (WNW)

This is a target species for the BTO Winter Survey and it is unsurprising that we have six subsequent encounters. Four of them are relatively local and two are away, one to Hertfordshire and one from Essex. This is a species that is responding to climate change and instead of spending the winter in Iberia, more and more are over-wintering in the UK. I've no doubt that their love of bird-feeders full of seeds like sunflower and niger helps.

The above records illustrate the movement of birds around the country and that Kings End Farm is a part of the available habitat for them.

## **BIRD REPORT**

The winter and early spring was wet and consequently there were large numbers of waders and waterfowl on the flooded fields near the River Stour. Big flocks of Lapwing and Golden Plover were encountered. The autumn yielded a number of migrant waders such as Whimbrel and Greenshank plus several Ring Ouzels. The winter produced some Waxwings. We have now established a BTO BirdTrack site to collect the many records for Kings End Farm in one place.

In addition to birds, we also recorded Beaver (which demolished a Sedge Warblers nest while eating Alexanders), Water Vole, no Mink and Harvest Mice nests in KE24, 25, 26 and 27. KE26 also recorded shrew sp., Field Mouse, Fox and Short-tailed Vole as well as Grass Snake and Slow Worm. It is planned to survey the small mammals, lepidoptera and flora of KE26 in 2024.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Permission to study the birds at Kings End Farm is thanks to the farm Manager, Anthony Curwen. Without his support, none of this could take place. Thanks are also due to the tenant farmer and the shepherd for their assistance and cooperation.

The study area is identified in the Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy (Making Space for Nature) as an Area of Particular Importance for Biodiversity (Ash Levels).

Peter Findley, East Kent Wildlife Group, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024