

A Songbird Survey of Aros Park 19/04/20 – 19/06/20

Aros Park is a wonderful amenity on the doorstep of Tobermory, the principal settlement on the Isle of Mull. Comprising a delightful mixture of indigenous broadleaved trees and non-native conifers, the former estate woodlands provide sanctuary for the usual range of resident songbirds, as well as a pleasant suite of migratory species in season. Counting singing and/or calling birds assumed to be holding territory was the primary methodology used in this survey, which was undertaken during 20 early morning visits between 19th April and 19th June 2020 (during initial lockdown). Other non-songbirds of interest were frequently encountered and these records and any significant extralimital observations have also been included.

Existing woodland trails in the park were divided into 7 transects (of unequal length, between 0.3 km – 2.4 km), totalling 10.5 km. While carrying out this study, I walked in excess of 366,000 steps, which approximately equates to 180 miles. So, it is fair to say that counting songbirds during lockdown was of great benefit to both my physical and mental well-being!

(No maps have been produced to outline transects. For those that may know Aros Park, the seven transects all follow existing woodland paths, some of which are used more than others. Suffice to say, at 6.00 am during lockdown, I rarely met a fellow human being, except for one or two usual suspects and their dogs!)

Goosander (*Mergus merganser*) A female was present on Lochan a' Ghurrabain at the centre of Aros Park on 26/05/20.

Red-throated Diver (*Gavia stellata*) Two noisy birds were both heard and seen from transect 6 on 25/05/20.

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) A single bird was seen at Lochan a' Ghurrabain on 15/05/20.

Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) One was at Lochan a' Ghurrabain on 26/05/20.

Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) In a woodland setting in Spring, it can be surprisingly difficult to notice this large bird of prey. Like others of its kind, this species can be secretive once they settle down to incubation duties, thus reducing the opportunity to observe them : 1 – 2 pairs likely breed in Aros Park.

Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) One was at Apper Mor (transect 4) on 15/05/20.

Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) One flushed from deciduous woodland on transect 1 on 25/05/20. Roding birds are occasionally reported from this location.

Wood Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*) Birds were recorded in five of the seven transects (discretion is required as several transects overlap.)

A minimum of 4 singing males were found, suggesting that a small population of these birds breed in the area. Finding these singing birds was a pleasant surprise as, until recently, this species was unusual in North Mull.

Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) Recorded in only two of the seven transects, both in areas where there is human habitation. Three singing males present around Ledaig car park, Tobermory (2) and at the Gatehouse at the (road) entrance to Aros Park.

Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) Recorded in six of the seven surveyed transects, but such can be the distance covered by a male of this species that the possibility exists that the same individual may be responsible for all sightings : 1 – 2 calling males.

Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) One was heard during daytime in Aros Park on 02/05/20.

Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) Recorded (sight records, as well as 'drumming' birds) in six of the seven transects, but discretion suggests that as few as three territorial pairs may be present. A path side nest was located, where fledged young were apparent on 24/05/20.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) One seen on 28/05/20 was thought extralimital to the study and probably breeding on adjacent moorland.

Sand Martin (*Riparia riparia*) Not known if breeding in the general park area, but known to do so elsewhere in Tobermory, where 1+ seen over the Tobermory roundabout on 20/04/20.

Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) Unknown if breeding in general park area, although up to 8 birds were regularly noted coming to feed above an area of clear-fell in transect 4 : 8 on 24/05/20. Elsewhere, 1 over Tobermory roundabout on 20/04/20.

House Martin (*Delichon urbica*) Unknown if breeding in general park area, although two birds were seen feeding over an area of clear-fell in transect 4 on 10/05/20 and 25/05/20.

Tree Pipit (*Anthus trivialis*) A passage bird was heard on 19/04/20. Recorded from two transects and from an area outwith the survey area : 2 – 3 singing/displaying males present. Elsewhere, 1 – 2 pairs bred at Baliscate.

Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*) No singing or displaying birds noted. However, up to five birds were present on an area of clear-fell in transect 4 between 23/04/20 and 15/05/20. A single pair bred at nearby Baliscate.

Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) Present in three transects where suitable breeding habitat available. Recorded feeding in area of clear-fell in transect 4 between 06/05/20 – 25/05/20, where fledged young (family party) noted on 28/05/20 At least one pair thought to have bred.

Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba yarrellii*) Present in two out of seven transects, where feeding birds present in area of clear-fell in transect 4 between 06/05/20 – 25/05/20; fledged young noted on 28/05/20. One pair thought to have bred.

Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) A total of 73 – 85 singing males were recorded in all seven transects. Transect 4 (clear-fell) held the densest concentration with up to 23 males. As is the case with many of the songbirds present on this survey, these figures may be prone to underestimation and should be regarded as a minimum number.

Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) 13 – 16 singing males/pairs present throughout (birds recorded in all seven transects). Elsewhere, 2 pairs were recorded at Baliscate.

Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) Recorded in all seven transects, with notable concentrations in T1 (Tobermory coastal path) (10) and along the main driveway into Aros Park (T3 – 15). A minimum of 54 territories were established during the survey.

Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) One in suitable breeding habitat on 20/05/20 was the only one recorded during the two months that the survey took place. Elsewhere, two were at Baliscate on 02/05/20 but not thereafter.

Blackbird (*Turdus merula*) A minimum of 36 singing males/territories were established during this study, with breeding pairs present in all seven transects.

Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) 16 – 18 singing males/pairs were present throughout.

Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) Recorded in five out of seven transects surveyed, but thought that only 2 pairs were present.

Sedge Warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*) A singing male in young conifers in transect 4 only remained in the area for a day (04/05/20) and did not breed.

Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*) Birds present in suitable breeding habitat in transect 5 (1 on 31/05/20) and transect 6 (2 on 28/05/20) may have involved the same birds : 1 pair. Elsewhere, extralimital singing males were at the entrance to Tobermory road sign on 10/05/20 and at Baliscate throughout Spring, where it is thought that one pair bred.

Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) Excellent habitat exists throughout the Aros Park area for this species, so it was no surprise that the survey returned evidence of a strong population. A total of between 24 – 29 singing males were recorded, with birds present in all seven transects. A male that mimicked the song of a Garden Warbler was heard in transect 3. An extralimital male seen and heard in the vicinity of the author's flat in Tobermory was heard (until 07/06/20) to imitate the songs of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and/or Wryneck and use this both as an accompaniment to (or as a replacement of) its normal song. It appears that this is something that has rarely been recorded in Britain before.

Wood Warbler (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*) For the first time in recent memory, no Wood Warblers returned in Spring to breed in Aros Park (2 – 3 singing males are usually present in transect 1 and transect 3.)

Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) Recorded in four of the seven transects surveyed, but probably only involved three individual birds, two of which were thought to be migrants. A single male in transect 3 was thought to be highly mobile and may be indicative of this bird searching for a mate : 1 pair probably bred. A male in part-song in transect 4 on 28/04/20 was thought to have been a migrant and wasn't seen or heard subsequently. A particularly grey and dull individual seen at close quarters on 30/04/20 showed characteristics of the Scandinavian race *abietinus* and was a good record for the Isle of Mull.

Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) A minimum of 38 – 40 singing males present throughout the area, with notable concentrations in transect 4 where there is clear-fell (12) and in transect 6 where the habitat is dominated by birch scrub (11). Elsewhere, 3 pairs bred at Baliscate.

Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) Aros Park represents excellent habitat for this species, owing to the extensive planting in recent decades of Sitka Spruce and to the historical use of non-native conifers. Nonetheless, it is thought that the numbers found of this species to be an underestimate of the true density. Recorded in all seven transects, with a minimum of 34 singing males being heard. An extralimital male was in song at Baliscate on 15/05/20.

Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) Recorded in five transects. Between 8 – 10 singing birds represents a pleasing return for a bird that has appeared to have suffered locally in recent times. First recorded on 13/05/20.

Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) While waiting and listening in an area that normally houses a singing male Wood Warbler, I was treated to a 'One Day Only' cameo from a cock Pied Flycatcher! Singing male, Aros Park, on 16/04/20.

Long-tailed Tit (*Aegithalus caudatus*) As an early breeder and a male with no distinctive song, this was a tricky species to come to terms with. Despite an abundance of potential breeding habitat, this was a species that threatened to get overlooked. Recorded in all but one of the seven transects (that was probably an oversight!), a minimum of 7 pairs were established, with fledged juveniles seen in transect 5 on 19/06/20. Elsewhere, 2 pairs bred successfully at Baliscate.

Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) Although seen in all seven transects, this is another species that has probably been underestimated : 39 singing males/territories found.

Great Tit (*Parus major*) Recorded in all seven transects : 25 singing males/territories found.

Coal Tit (*Parus ater*) Considering the wealth of suitable breeding habitat, particularly in those transects dominated by Sitka Spruce and/or other conifers, it is possible that this total may also be an underestimate : 25 singing males/territories.

Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*) With an individual coming to feeders at the Mull Theatre in transect 5 during the Winter months, it was hoped that a pair may have settled to breed in the area. However, no evidence of this species' presence was found in 20 visits to the location in Spring.

Treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*) Another species that can be difficult to detect if not singing or calling. Therefore, as Aros Park is a veritable paradise for this species, the following total is likely to be a gross underestimate : 9 singing males/territories.

Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) A bird that appears to have increased in number and range in North Mull during the past decade. However, due to its secretive nature during the breeding season, it was a species that was likely to be overlooked (and, so it proved!) Recorded in only two of the seven transects in the park : minimum of 2 pairs found.

Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*) Recorded in five out of seven transects : 4 – 6 pairs present.

Raven (*Corvus corax*) Not known if breeding in park or in near vicinity : 1 pair suggested by sightings in only two of the seven transects surveyed.

Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) Only seen on a single occasion in one transect (T3 at Gatehouse, where conceivably could breed.) Elsewhere, a small colony exists (no estimate of numbers) at Baliscate.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) Recorded in only two transects : 6 singing males held territories in the Ledaig car park at the start of transect 1 and birds were seen around the Gatehouse in transect 3. Elsewhere, a further 6 singing males/territories were recorded at Baliscate.

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) Recorded in all seven transects : 56 – 60 singing males/territories.

Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*) Two singing males/territories at nearby Baliscate.

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) Recorded in six of the seven transects : 9 singing birds/pairs.

Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) Complicated, as birds frequently overflowed transects : 4 – 12 pairs present during breeding season.

Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*) Extralimital to study, a single pair bred successfully at nearby Baliscate.

Lesser Redpoll (*Carduelis cabaret*) Like Siskin, trying to evaluate numbers for this species was complicated by the tendency for song flights to extend over more than one adjoining transect : 4 – 9 displaying males were present.

Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*) No singing males were heard during the course of this survey, all records referring to individual birds or small groups in Spring. The presence of birds at this time has been taken as indicative of having been present in suitable habitat during the breeding season :-1 on 19/04/20; 4 on 27/04/20 may have been a family party; 2 + 2 on 30/04/20; 1 + 1 on 15/05/20; 1 on 20/05/20; and 8 on 31/05/20 which may have been one or two families.

Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) Another species that is tricky to survey, due to the male having a rarely heard song (of sorts!). Nonetheless, this species was found in five of the seven transects, although the total of only 8 pairs may well be an underestimate.

Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) A singing male was present in suitable breeding habitat at Lochan a' Ghurrabain on 03/05/20. It remained there for just this single day and wasn't re-found subsequently.

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