

Bexley species spotlight: Corn Buntings (*Emberiza calandra*) and Skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*)

Joseph Johnson



Corn buntings and skylarks are rather ordinary looking birds with extraordinary behaviour. These birds are farmland specialists but both species have made their home along the Thames marshes here in Bexley. These birds have undergone a dramatic decline across Great Britain due to a switch in farming methods and mass habitat loss which has become so severe that both species are red listed and have disappeared from many areas of the UK (for example corn buntings have become extinct from Ireland). They are not seen in central London, but a small and very important population live here in Bexley. Unfortunately both Erith and Crayford marshes are threatened by proposed development and we need to do all we can to protect these areas or we may lose species such as corn bunting and skylarks, not just from Bexley but from the whole of Greater London.

The corn bunting is a farmland and heathland specialist that was once abundant across many areas of the UK. Unfortunately that is no longer the case. The corn bunting is in the same family as the strikingly coloured yellow hammer, ciril bunting and snow bunting. However the corn buntings themselves are rather plain looking beige/ brown birds but it isn't their appearance



that makes this bird extraordinary it is the corn bunting's behaviour.



Skylark. Photo: Roger Tidman

The corn bunting's breeding behaviour is particularly interesting. The male corn bunting is very territorial and controlling. It defends a large territory from other males and within this territory the male will have many females (they are said to mate with up to 18 females every season) but no other males. This behaviour is known as polygyny. The corn bunting has a wingspan of just below 30cm making it one of our largest song birds. These birds have a very loud song which is said to sound like someone rattling keys. They also, strangely, nest on the ground, generally in the summer.

The skylark is often confused with corn bunting as they are both similarly coloured song birds that occupy the same habitat. However, they are very different birds indeed with very different behaviours. Skylarks are known for their amazing song. They fly over 50 metres into the air whilst singing (unlike any other bird). Their song is very complex and can be heard throughout the year (though spring and summer is the best time to hear them) and they start singing at dawn. As well as their beautiful song, skylarks like corn buntings are well known for their strange breeding behaviour, and ground nesting. Both species make grass nests that are remarkably camouflaged in order to protect them from predators like foxes and domestic cats and dogs.

These species are quite similar in appearance, however there are various characteristics that set them apart. Firstly if you are up close take a look at the beak of both species. You'll find skylarks have a slender beak whilst corn buntings have a characteristic short stubby beak perfect for seed feeding. The heads of both species are key too because skylarks have a small crest on the top of their head. However, the behaviour of skylarks is the main key because in song they fly vertically in the air, which no other birds do, making skylarks unmistakable.

Luckily, Bexley is still home to breeding skylarks and corn buntings. This is something to be proud of, but we must protect these birds and their habitats. There is also a small population of skylarks inland around the joydens/chalk wood area. There is little known about the inland population so if you spot any skylarks please let us at Bexley Wildlife know.