

creating habitat for **NIGHTINGALES**



in South Worcestershire



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Severn Trent Water

Discovering Worcestershire

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE NIGHTINGALES SINGING ON YOUR LAND?

CREATING HABITAT FOR NIGHTINGALES.

Nightingales are well known for their remarkable, powerful and beautiful song, usually heard at night. When these summer visitors arrive back from African wintering grounds in mid-April the males sing for most of the day and night until they attract a mate and settle to nest.

Despite the brilliant song the birds are not brightly coloured: warm brown above, paler beneath, with a bright russet-red tail. They are related to the robin and about twice the size.

They are rarely seen as they hide away in dense coppice woodland or scrub.



nightingale Mike Weston

Britain is on the north-western edge of their breeding range and most have always been found in southern England. British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) surveys show a marked decline in range and numbers, and the 1999 survey shows that most birds are now found south-east of a line joining the Wash and Somerset.



Nightingale distribution in England, recorded by BTO survey in 1999.

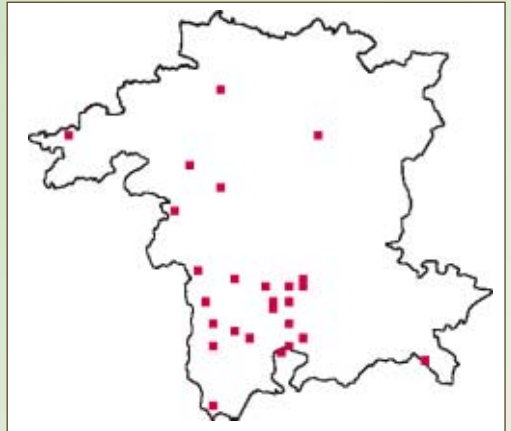
Sixty years ago nightingales were quite common in woods and thickets in south Worcestershire, and to the south of the county boundary in Gloucestershire, with smaller numbers in east Herefordshire and Shropshire. During the last 20 years there has been a marked decline and the birds have vanished from most of Worcestershire. Of the few left,

most are now found in the south central part of the county, centred around Croome.

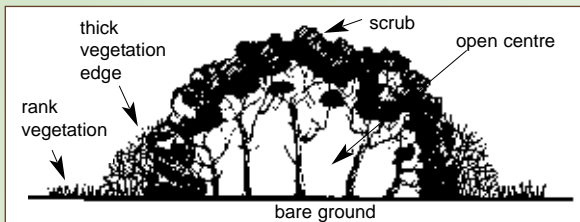
Nightingales were often traditionally associated with woodlands managed on a coppice rotation system.

Most of these systems have now gone and very few woods are now suitable for nightingales. Even in the past nightingales were known to be scrub birds, quite often found in damp areas near streams. Nowadays most remaining nightingales breed in scrub habitats.

Recent BTO research, funded by Anglian Water, has shown that nightingales require scrub or coppice of a rather special structure. Scrub thickets with young vigorous growth of blackthorn or hawthorn are favoured, especially where the dense canopy of twigs and leaves shade out plants which might grow below, leaving bare or leaf-litter-covered



Distributions of nightingales in Worcestershire - BTO survey 1999 (59 singing males).



Cross section through the ideal scrub thicket. The densely vegetated edges descends to the ground and are surrounded by thick, rank vegetation. Plan right



Rotational cutting of scrub will produce a structure similar to this which can mirror the structure of good thickets.

ground. Suitable scrub patches have a canopy that descends to the ground round the edges and are often surrounded by brambles, dog rose, rank grasses or other plants. The birds forage for invertebrates in the cave-like spaces beneath the scrub and foray into the surrounding vegetation. They nest on the ground within the scrub.

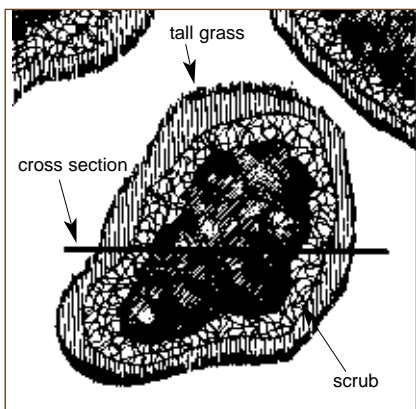
In Worcestershire and nearby counties scrub or coppice of this structure is very scarce and lack of suitable habitat may be one reason for the decline in nightingales. Interestingly, scrub habitat with the favoured structure was created at the Severn Trent's Strensham Water Treatment Works as part of a landscaping scheme and it was promptly occupied by nightingales. It therefore seems likely that creating similar scrub and planting trees at dense spacing near the remaining breeding population would encourage more birds to breed and reverse the decline.



Suitable scrub but edges have too little vegetation.

Male nightingales do return each year to their previous year's patch and young males are attracted to breed near singing males if there is suitable habitat, thus forming loose colonies which are self-sustaining providing there is continuity of good habitat.

If an owner can once attract nightingales onto their land there is a good chance they will keep appearing every year given good scrub habitat!



Plan of ideal scrub habitat. Cross section, left.

WHAT TO DO

Opportunities exist to create correctly structured scrub by modifying hedge management or creating scrub patches in field corners or adjacent to woods. Patches should be reasonably large (perhaps an acre) but can be any shape.

Several patches connected by short lengths of big hedge would be suitable. Creation of, or re-starting coppice in woodland will also help. Whichever method is used cyclical cutting of part of the habitat every few years (between seven and twelve years depending on growth rates) will be needed to constantly re-supply correctly structured scrub.

Land owners, especially in South Worcestershire, may well be able to attract nightingales on to their land by making the correct habitat - what a thrill it would be to have nightingales singing at the back of your house in scrub you had created! This could happen to you quite quickly, and there is advice and possibly grant aid available to help you.



By creating the right scrub with the right margins you will also provide habitat for many other birds (for example linnets yellowhammers and whitethroats), butterflies, other insects and plants.

ADVICE AND SUPPORT

Grants may be available under the following schemes:

COUNTRYSIDE

STEWARDSHIP offers 10

year agreements to improve the natural beauty and diversity of

the countryside. Nightingales can be helped

through Stewardship by payments for management of scrub, hedgerow planting and restoration, and small-scale tree planting. For further information please contact DEFRA on 01905 768900.

THE WOODLAND GRANT SCHEME may be available for

establishment of new woodlands by planting or management of existing woodlands through re-instating or continuing a coppice cycle, ride and scrub management. For further information contact the Forestry Commission, West Midland Conservancy on 01905 761220.

WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY

COUNCIL offer grants for practical small-scale projects, such as the creation and management of

habitat for nightingales in the Worcestershire countryside, with a maximum payment in any financial year. Contact one of the Countryside Projects Officers on 01905 766493 to obtain further information and an application form.



whitethroat Tony Hamblin



nightingale Mike Weston

Further advice and information on Nightingales is also available from:

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, Lower Smite Farm, Smite Hill, Hindlip, Worcester WR3 8SZ. Tel. 01905 754919

English Nature, Bronsil House, Eastnor, Ledbury, Herefordshire HR8 1EP.
Tel. 01531 638500

Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group, Block C, Government Buildings, Whittington Rd, Worcester WR5 2LQ. Tel. 01905 763355 extension 8345.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This leaflet has been created for the Worcestershire Biodiversity Partnership. The participants are Severn Trent, English Nature, Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group, Forestry Commission, Worcestershire County Council and Worcestershire Wildlife Trust.

This leaflet is derived from information on nightingale distribution, numbers and habitat structure provided by the British Trust for Ornithology, who also provided the diagrams/photos.

The production of this leaflet was sponsored by Severn Trent Water. Severn Trent Water is also committed to the conservation of wildlife in the wider environment and is supporting the project partnership to assist in the recovery of the nightingale in the region. For details about the company's action for biodiversity, please contact 0121 722 4988/4563

This leaflet was produced by



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