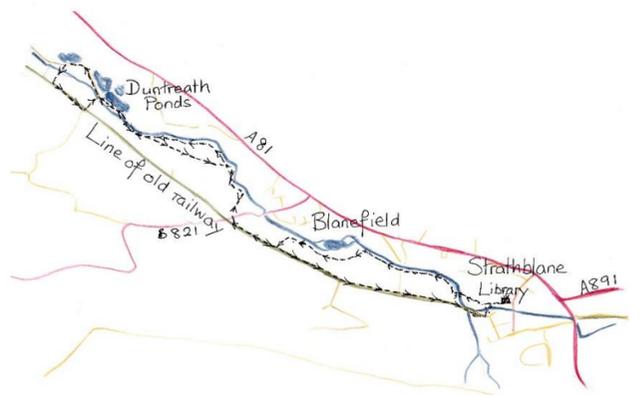


A year in the Blane Valley

John & Judith Chapman

Judith began making lists of birds and other animals we saw out on walks during lockdown. In April 2021, she decided to enter our observations on Bird Track and has done so ever since. Out of the blue, early in 2022, she received an email from Bird Track thanking her for her contributions and informing her of the sites she had visited most frequently during 2021. Top of the list was the Blane Valley, and so we felt inspired to look back through our lists and photographs to see just what we had seen there. What follows is the distillate of our 2021 Blane Valley experiences. John took all the photographs. The accompanying drawings were made by Judith in January 2022.

The Blane Valley runs north-west from Strathblane. To its north is the busy A81 heading from Glasgow to the Trossachs. To its west is the West Highland Way, equally busy though this time with walkers heading from Milngavie to Fort William. Neither impacts significantly on the section of the Blane Valley along which we made our regular walks, where at most times our encounters were usually restricted to occasional dog walkers and a few others enjoying the varied scenery on offer. The section we walked extended from the Strathblane library to the private gardens of Duntreath Castle, a distance of some 3.5 km. A wandering path runs close to the burn itself for much of its length while modestly displaced from it is the disused railway line that ran from Glasgow via Lennoxton to Aberfoyle. Normally, our outward walk kept us as close to the Blane Water as possible.



We first visited the Blane Valley during 2020, having had it recommended to us during a chance meeting at the nearby Ardinging SWT Reserve. On that first ever walk by the burn we saw dippers and we continued to see them on subsequent visits. They could be seen pretty well anywhere along our 3.5 km beat, albeit some spots were favoured locations with a higher probability of seeing them there. Hence, as 2021 began, we made a point of noting our sightings on a map, hoping that as the seasons progressed we might be able to observe nesting behaviour and young birds being fed.

January 2021 was cold so dippers swimming and feeding in ice and snow lived up to their name of



“winter bathers”. At this stage of the year we generally saw single birds, but by late winter we were seeing two birds



close together in several places. On our most productive walk, we saw dippers at five widely spaced points, with two of the sightings being of dipper pairs.



One day we were thrilled to hear one dipper singing loud and long under a little footbridge. A second dipper arrived and we enjoyed a display of “dipper dancing” before they flew off together. We never witnessed mating, nor did we ever spot a definite nest site other than one that was abandoned when one of the dipper pair was sadly killed.



At least one pair bred successfully and in early June we saw a single young dipper. After this sighting, the numbers of dippers we saw fell away dramatically, and it was not until close to the year end that we again began seeing dippers during our Blane Valley walks.



The other riverine birds we often saw were grey wagtails. From mid-March onwards through to September we saw these colourful birds on almost every visit. Like the dippers, at least some of these bred successfully.





Away from the river our walk took us through mature deciduous forest, alongside scrub and close to open pasture and meadowland. As the spring advanced our embryonic skills in identifying bird songs were needed increasingly. Some stretches of woodland were almost guaranteed to offer a joyful chorus of passerines. For example, the nuthatches were hard to miss as were the robins and various tits. Although fresh leaves could make visual identification and photography difficult we were able to follow the progress of pairing, nesting and feeding young before the quiet days of July.



It became possible to predict likely sites for many of the larger birds. Song thrushes could be seen feeding on the ground at a particular field corner or singing out from certain tree tops. Rooks were confined to a limited number of places, whereas carrion crows were everywhere. Jackdaws had a particular preference for the football field and the sewage works!



The only raptors we saw in the Blane Valley were buzzards, and these we saw throughout the year. They were seen most frequently close to the conifer plantation that was part of the Duntreath Estate, but could be encountered at almost any stage of the walk. Sometimes we saw them soaring, possibly with an accompanying corvid, with the Campsie Fells as a backdrop, and on one occasion we had close up views of a buzzard on the ground very close to the line of the old railway. This was in winter and it appeared to be grubbing for worms in pastureland where horses grazed.

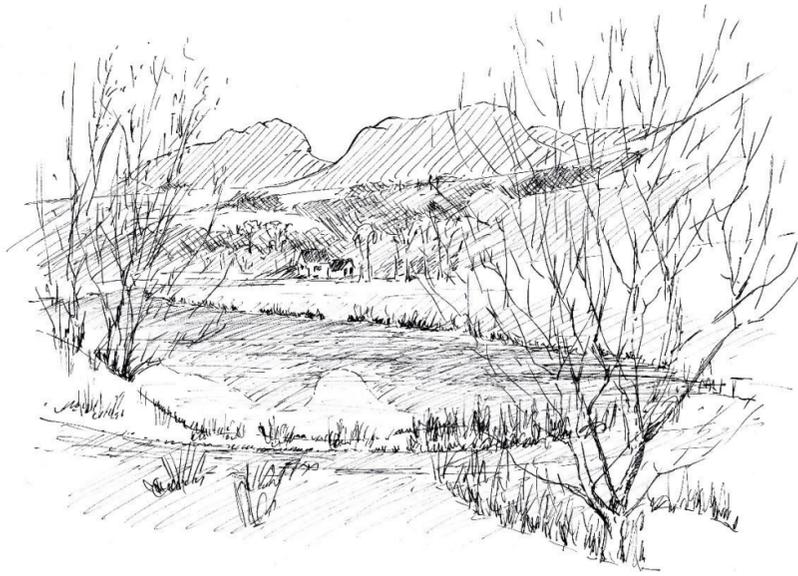


The other large bird we saw quite frequently were pheasants, hardly surprising as they were bred on the other side of the A81 for shooting. While not generally over impressed by the intelligence of these birds we did think it was wise of them to relocate to an area where men with guns were absent!



A complete list of the birds we saw during 2021 is given below.

Black-headed Gull	Blackbird	Blackcap	Blue Tit	Bullfinch
Buzzard	Canada Goose	Carrion Crow	Chaffinch	Chiffchaff
Coal Tit	Collared Dove	Common Gull	Cuckoo	Curlew
Dipper	Duncock	Feral Pigeon	Fieldfare	Goldcrest
Goldfinch	Goosander	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Great Tit	Greenfinch
Grey Heron	Grey Wagtail	Greylag Goose	House Martin	House Sparrow
Jackdaw	Jay	Kingfisher	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Little Grebe
Long-tailed Tit	Magpie	Mallard	Mistle thrush	Moorhen
Mute Swan	Nuthatch	Oystercatcher	Pheasant	Pied/White Wagtail
Pink-footed Goose	Redwing	Robin	Rook	Sedge Warbler
Siskin	Snipe	Song Thrush	Starling	Swallow
Teal	Treecreeper	Tufted Duck	Whitethroat	Willow Warbler
Woodpigeon	Wren			



The Blane Pools lie within the Duntreath Estate and are just before the private gardens – no access to casual walkers - and as such were close to our normal turning point. At most times of year there was activity on the pools, the most reliable sighting being the resident mute swans. Indeed, unlike the rest of the wildlife it was not unusual for one swan to fly towards us, possibly mistaking us for estate workers who tend to bring them food on a daily basis.



Also present at various times of year were duck (mallard, tufties, goosander, teal), geese (Canada and greylag), moorhen, grey heron, little grebe and, on one occasion, we saw a kingfisher. Otter also live here but so far they have completely eluded us!



Our best sightings came during the courtship and breeding seasons, broadly speaking from the end of February to the end of June. In late winter both Canada and greylag geese could be heard well before we reached the pools themselves and on several occasions we enjoyed fly-bys as tens of birds arrived and left. Eventually a few pairs decided the islands on the pools and the marshy ground separating them were suitable breeding grounds and the courtship activity began in earnest. During this time the resident mute swans showed no obvious courtship activity and we wondered if they were going to breed at all. In the end, and rather later than during the 2020 season, they set to but chose a nest site substantially out of view from the paths. We could see them distantly as they brought in nesting material but had no view of the nest itself.



Geese and swans bred successfully and both brought their young to the main ponds and their immediate surrounds. In particular the adult swans brought their cygnets to two favoured stretches of water where we enjoyed excellent views of seven cygnets with at least one attentive parent close by on all our midsummer visits.



Prior to the hatching of their young, we frequently saw swans and geese swimming in close proximity on the same area of pool. Once young were being raised everything changed. Woe betide the unwise goose that came too close to the swans and their brood; we were left in no doubt that the swan was the alpha bird!





Of course, we didn't just see birds on our walks. By March, primroses added welcome colour and, by June, many flowers could be found along the banks of the Blane Water and in the adjoining meadows. Elsewhere areas that had appeared rather barren and muddy in January became almost impenetrable by summer due to the fast growth of the leaves of the butterbur plants after the flowers had appeared.



And where there are flowering plants there are also insects. Again, starting in March, hoverflies began to emerge. Bees, which we didn't try to classify, and butterflies, which we did, were visible for a number of months starting in April. The meadow we had to cross after leaving deciduous forest along the Blane Water and before we reached the ponds was particularly rich in butterflies with orange tip, green-veined white, small heath, meadow brown, ringlet and peacock all being frequent sightings. In winter crossing this particular meadow was a low point in our walks, in summer this was definitely not the case.



As the summer progressed, bird song ceased and the birds themselves found suitable areas of concealment for their moult. It was at this stage that some of the dragonfly and damselfly species came into their own providing a good alternative reason for loitering round the ponds in particular. Four-spotted chasers, common darters, common blue and azure damselflies were all seen on sunny days!



Wild mammals were rarely seen with the exception of rabbits. Locals are proud that among them are black rabbits. Our prize mammal sighting of last year was also a fan of rabbit, though we doubt this feeling was reciprocated. Returning to the car after an April walk we had a brief but excellent view of a weasel running along the banks of the burn!

