LITTLEHAMPTON FORT PROJECT – BIRD SURVEY

Owen Mitchell **Prepared 25th June 2013**

Introduction: I have been asked to conduct a survey of the birdlife in and around the area of the old Fort, situated on the south-east corner of the Littlehampton Golf course and near the mouth of the River Arun. I have been a bird-watcher in West Sussex for over forty years and have a good general knowledge of the birds of the area. In particular I have watched at the Climping Gap area, including the Fort, for many years together with other local birders. I am therefore able to draw on my previous knowledge of the birds that occur in the area. I have been shown the area where restoration work is envisaged.

Method: I made three visits to the Fort and its immediate environs in spring 2013 during the breeding season, to check for breeding birds or birds otherwise frequenting the site, (on 17th ,22nd and 29th May). I also contacted other local birdwatchers and certain officers of the Sussex Ornithological Society to ensure they did not have relevant information I was unaware of. I also researched my own files to check for breeding bird and other information.

Results: Much of the old Fort is currently covered in ivy, with some invading bramble and other scrub growth. It might be anticipated that the ivy-covered walls would support a number of breeding species, but I did not find that to be the case and indeed from previous experience, I can say that, perhaps surprisingly, very few breeding birds are actually supported by this habitat here. One pair of Dunnocks *(Prunella modularis)* with fledged young was present on the west walls, with a second pair of the same species present in the adjacent scrub further to the south-west but not actually on the Fort. No other breeding species was found within the confines of the Fort itself. A pair of Wrens *(Troglodytes troglodytes)* was present around scrub to the south though not actually within the confines of the Fort; breeding was not confirmed but their presence makes this likely. There is an area of gorse adjacent to the south-east corner of the Fort (where an access point is likely to be made) and here a pair of Linnets *(Carduelis cannabina)* was noted frequenting; again it is likely that they were breeding but this was not positively confirmed. In this same general area to the south-east a singing Common Whitethroat *(Sylvia communis)* was apparently holding territory, although it also frequently visited gorse areas nearer the (second?) tee and was apparently nesting there.

Conclusions: Only one pair of a common breeding species of bird was found within the confines of the Fort during the survey. Three or perhaps four other

pairs of birds were present in the scrub and bushes surrounding the perimeter of the Fort though not within it. Previous experience of birdwatching this site indicates this is the normal situation and that few birds use the ivy-covered walls in the breeding season. I can therefore see no reason to object to the stripping of the ivy from the Fort walls once the breeding season is over (say mid-July), and this would also allow those birds on the periphery to fledge their young. I would suggest that work could commence fairly soon, and suggest 1st August 2013 might be a sensible target date.

I must now explain that in my opinion the area around the Fort, and indeed the whole golf course area, is arguably of most importance to birdlife during the migration seasons, especially in autumn. It is at this time each year (mid-August to mid October) that thousands of birds pass through the area, many lingering in coastal spots to feed up and put on weight in order to fuel their migratory flights. Insectivorous birds such as Blackcap *(Sylvia atricapilla)* and Garden Warbler *(Sylvia borin)* change their diets at this time to include berries and fruits, vital to them in order to build up fat reserves. Ivy berries are frequently taken at this time, so there would be a minor loss of resources when the Fort is cleared of ivy, but given the amount of surrounding habitat and berry bushes, this is probably negligible. The other factor to consider is areas of cover where birds may rest and shelter; it is here the gorse bushes and scrubby patches are of major importance. These bushes are used by a whole range of species and I would urge that as much of this existing vegetation as possible is left untouched so that wildlife may benefit. A certain amount of clearance and disturbance is of course unavoidable during the restoration, but I would stress the need to avoid the removal of any of the gorse and undergrowth wherever possible.

Finally, I feel sure that if the restoration project is handled sensitively, disturbance to the birds and other wildlife in this important area could be fairly minimal.

I trust this will assist.

Owen Mitchell