A HAVEN FOR FARMLAND BIRDS: The unexpected treasures of a small patch of arable land in the Cambridge green belt, by John Meed, 2022, Independent Publishing Network, 160pp., Paperback £19.95, ISBN 978-1800688216.

Review by committee member BH

The reader with a mere general interest in wildlife and the environment can only marvel at John's passionate study and prodigious knowledge of birds and bird behaviour in the fields and hedgerows around Nine Wells Nature Reserve, just a stone's throw from the inexorably advancing Biomedical Campus.

The book describes, in some detail, the birds that John has encountered over 10 years on his walks along the footpaths surrounding the arable fields in this area.

His main focus is on the grey partridge to which he devotes chapters 2 to 5 before going on to describe his observations of corn bunting (chapter 6) then yellow wagtails, skylark, linnet and yellow hammer, and more briefly, lapwing, greenfinch, starling, whitethroat, reed buntings and gold finches in chapter 7.

He has watched these birds carefully and followed their behaviour across the seasons using his experience as a surveyor. What is unusual is the detail he provides of the social behaviour of these animals as individuals, pairs, coveys (6-15 related birds) and larger populations. One experiences them, through his sensitive accounts, like a community of humans going about their daily lives.

There are detailed descriptions of individual grey partridges which he is able to identify and follow as they associate, pair, breed and rear their families. His observations are well supported by references to scientific papers which expand our understanding of the way these birds behave and are listed in a detailed bibliography.

Of particular interest is his observations on the way the grey partridges have adjusted to the pedestrians and cyclists along the footpaths.

The book describes John's personal encounters with the animals, particularly birds, around Nine Wells (close to where he lives). However it also provides a stark reminder that a large number of our beloved animals and plants are under threat from a range of factors. For instance the linnet has declined from a UK population of about 150,000 in 1970 to about 50,000 in 2018 (graph p.119).

The last section of the book details these threats, particularly from modern farming practices and development but provides some positives from his locality. He points out that the problems for rain forests are well published but the threat to UK species is less widely reported. This book goes some way to addressing this lack of information.

Interestingly the Nine Wells area appears to be bucking the UK trend in species decline. This may partially be due to the rich and varied habitats around the springs.

Also the farmed fields here are supportive of wildlife. Of the 8 principles for conservation management on an arable farm produced by the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (listed on page 140) the following are satisfied at Nine Wells: Look after established wildlife habitats

- Maximise the environmental value of field boundaries;
- Create a network of field margins;
- Establish flower-rich habitats;
- Provide winter food for birds.

Spring cropping is sometimes used and there are some measures to help wild life; the recommended 10% weed cover in wheat fields is generally present for example.

There are delightful song descriptions for instance of yellowhammers on page 114.

There is a helpful map at the beginning of the book so we can identify the bird territories and understand the interaction of the different groups and the potential threats. There are also high quality personal photographs distributed throughout the book which help us identify the birds that he describes and also graphs showing the decline

in bird numbers. There are tables on page 147and 148 listing the species he has observed (93 bird, 19 mammals, 25 butterflies and 14 dragonflies). Of the birds 21 are on the red list.

The book is an enjoyable read but also informative and thought provoking about how we need to think about our threatened local environments.