A Guide to Birds in Blackmore Churchyard

What you might see, when to look, and how to make the most of a small patch of green around a church.

Compiled by the Eco Church Group, Priory Church of St Laurence, Blackmore

Summer 2026

This guide is written for typical Essex village and town churchyards: a mix of mown grass, longer edges, yews and other mature trees, shrubs, boundary walls, and the church building itself. Even a modest churchyard can hold a surprising variety of birds because it offers shelter, nesting places, and year-round food - berries, seeds, invertebrates, and (in winter) scraps around feeders in nearby gardens.

How to use this guide

- **Start with your ears.** Stand still for two minutes and listen; many churchyard birds are heard before they are seen.
- **Walk the edges.** Birds use hedges, ivy, shrubs, and wall lines as cover and travel routes.
- **Look up, then down.** Check the canopy for movement, then scan lawns and paths for feeding birds.
- **Visit little and often.** Ten-minute visits at different times of day beat one long visit.
- **Be considerate.** Keep distance from nesting birds, avoid disturbing mourners and services, and stick to paths where requested.

Churchyard habitats and where birds hide

Mature trees (especially yew, oak, lime, sycamore)

Trees provide nesting holes, bark crevices, and insect-rich foliage. Yews and other evergreens offer winter shelter; in autumn and winter, look for birds feeding on berries or sheltering in dense branches. Watch for **Blue Tit**, **Great Tit**, **Long-tailed Tit**, **Goldcrest** (often in conifers/yew), and **Great Spotted Woodpecker**.

Shrubs, hedges, and ivy

These are the churchyard's 'bird highways'. Dense cover is used for nesting, roosting, and quick escapes from predators. Ivy is especially valuable: it flowers late (nectar for insects) and berries in winter. Look and listen here for **Robin**, **Dunnock**, **Wren**,

Blackbird, and in spring/summer the insect-eaters **Chiffchaff** or **Blackcap** (more likely where there is scrubby edge habitat).

Mown grass, longer margins, and leaf litter

Short grass can be good feeding for thrushes and starlings (worms and leatherjackets), while longer margins hold seed heads and insects. Leaf litter under shrubs is prime foraging for birds that 'flick and probe'. Watch for **Blackbird** and **Song Thrush** and listen for **Starling** overhead.

Stonework, walls, and the church building

Gaps in stonework and roof spaces can provide nesting ledges and crevices. In many places, **Jackdaws** use towers and cavities, **Pied Wagtails** forage on paths and short turf, and **House Sparrows** (where once common) may nest under eaves nearby. Swifts sometimes use church buildings in summer where suitable access exists.

What to look for by season

Spring (March – May)

Territories form and birds sing more. Listen for **Robin** and **Wren** from cover, and for the repeated 'chiff-chaff' of **Chiffchaff** in leafy corners. Watch tits carrying moss and feathers to nest holes and look for **Blackbird** and **Dunnock** feeding low on lawns.

Summer (June – August)

Young birds appear - often scruffy, short-tailed, and begging noisily. Family parties of **Blue Tits** and **Great Tits** move through trees. **Swifts** and **House Martins** may scream overhead (especially near villages), while **Jackdaws** and **Magpies** patrol open grass.

Autumn (September – November)

Food becomes the focus. Look for berry-feeders in ivy and yew, and listen for contact calls of mixed tit flocks ('tsee-tsee' and soft trills) as they work methodically through branches. Thrushes often spend time on lawns after rain when worms are close to the surface.

Winter (December – February)

Leafless trees make birds easier to see, but they may be quieter and keep tight to cover. Check evergreens for **Goldcrest** and tit flocks, look on paths and open ground for **Pied Wagtail**, and watch for corvids (especially **Jackdaw** and **Rook**) commuting to feeding fields and communal roosts.

Common churchyard birds (with quick ID tips)

The list below focuses on birds you are reasonably likely to encounter in many Essex churchyards. Presence varies with nearby habitat (farmland, street trees, woodland, water) and management (short-mown vs longer edges).

Wren

Where: low cover - ivy, brambles, dense shrubs, log piles. **Clues:** tiny, brown, often with tail cocked upright. **Sound:** an unexpectedly loud, busy song for such a small bird.

In Blackmore: Very commonly heard birdsong but rarely seen bird. Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26). 'Count for Nature' survey during 'Love Your Burial Ground Week' (9.6.26).

Blackbird

Where: lawns after rain, under shrubs, along paths. **Clues:** males are black with a yellow bill; females are brown. **Behaviour:** feeds by running, stopping, and tugging worms; gives a sharp 'tchook' alarm when startled.

In Blackmore: Frequently seen and heard throughout the year around Blackmore. Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26).

Robin

Where: edges, ivy, around graves and shrubs. **Clues:** bright red-orange face and chest; often cocks its head when watching you. **Behaviour:** follows gardeners and walkers, snapping up disturbed insects; sings even in winter on mild days.

In Blackmore: Frequently seen and heard throughout the year around Blackmore. Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26).

Dunnock

Where: hedges and ground beneath shrubs. **Clues:** grey head and breast with brown streaked back; often slips about mouse-like. **Sound:** a thin, high, hurried song in spring.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26).

Blue Tit

Where: canopy and outer branches; nest holes in old trees. **Clues:** blue cap and wings, yellow underparts, white face with dark eye-stripe. **Behaviour:** acrobatic; in winter often part of mixed flocks with other tits.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26). 'Count for Nature' survey during 'Love Your Burial Ground Week' (9.6.26).

Great Tit

Where: trees and shrubs; frequently uses nest boxes and holes. **Clues:** black head with big white cheeks; yellow belly with a black stripe. **Sound:** 'teacher-teacher' in spring.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26). 'Count for Nature' survey during 'Love Your Burial Ground Week' (9.6.26).

Long-tailed Tit

Where: moving through hedges and tree lines in chatty family groups. **Clues:** very small body with a very long tail; black, white and pinkish tones. **Sound:** constant soft contact calls ('sirr-sirr-sirr').

In Blackmore: 'Count for Nature' survey during 'Love Your Burial Ground Week' (9.6.26).

Chaffinch

Where: often feeds on the ground, especially under trees and near hedges. **Clues:** males in spring are pinkish on the chest with a blue-grey cap; females are browner. **Sound:** a descending, energetic song; sharp 'pink' call in flight.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26). 'Count for Nature' survey during 'Love Your Burial Ground Week' (9.6.26).

Woodpigeon

Where: lawns, trees, and on rooftops nearby. **Clues:** large grey pigeon with white neck patch and white wing bars in flight. **Sound:** the familiar five-note cooing rhythm, often from high branches.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26). 'Count for Nature' survey during 'Love Your Burial Ground Week' (9.6.26).

Collared Dove

Where: edges of the churchyard, nearby gardens, and wires. **Clues:** pale sandy-grey dove with a thin black 'collar' on the neck. **Sound:** a steady 'coo-COO-coo'.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26).

Jackdaw

Where: tower and roof spaces, big trees, nearby fields. **Clues:** small 'crow' with a grey nape and pale eyes; very social. **Behaviour:** pairs and flocks; lots of chattering calls and acrobatic flight.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26). 'Count for Nature' survey during 'Love Your Burial Ground Week' (9.6.26).

Magpie

Where: open grass and scattered trees; often bold and obvious. **Clues:** black-and-white with long tail; flashes green and purple sheen up close. **Behaviour:** walks confidently on lawns; harsh 'chak-chak' calls.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26).

Carrion Crow

Where: anywhere—trees, grass, walls; often alone or in pairs. **Clues:** larger than a jackdaw and all-black, with a heavier bill. **Sound:** classic 'caw'.

In Blackmore: Dawn chorus bird (8.5.26). 'Count for Nature' survey during 'Love Your Burial Ground Week' (9.6.26).

Great Spotted Woodpecker

Where: mature trees; often heard first. **Clues:** bold black-and-white pattern; red under-tail; males have a red patch on the back of the head. **Sound:** sharp 'kick' call and spring drumming on resonant branches.

In Blackmore: An unwelcome visitor to the churchyard responsible for drilling holes in the bell tower prior to renovation in 2025. Seen in March 2026 on weather-vane

drumming. Heard on 15.6.26 drumming on a tree. During the 'Big Butterfly Count' (where no butterflies were seen) on 18.7.26, a **green woodpecker** was observed flying over the wall and around the churchyard.

Goldfinch

Where: treetops and seed-rich edges; often flies over calling. **Clues:** red face, black-and-white head, bold yellow wing flash. **Sound:** bright, tinkling calls; often in small flocks outside breeding season.

In Blackmore: Heard on 15.6.26.

Starling

Where: short turf feeding for leatherjackets and worms; also on rooftops and trees. **Clues:** short-tailed, triangular-winged; glossy dark plumage with speckling in winter. **Sound:** whistles, clicks, and mimicry; often very noisy in groups.

In Blackmore: Not spotted in Blackmore churchyard.

House Sparrow

Where: church and nearby buildings, hedges, and shrubs; often in chattering groups. **Clues:** males have a grey cap and black bib; females are plainer brown with a pale eye-stripe. **Tip:** if you see none, it may simply reflect local declines—try nearby streets and gardens.

In Blackmore: Heard in Blackmore Road after sunrise (8.5.26). A once very common bird.

Pied Wagtail

Where: paths, lawns, and around puddles. **Clues:** black, white and grey; constantly wagging its long tail. **Behaviour:** runs to catch small insects; often gives a sharp 'tsilip' call in flight.

In Blackmore: Not spotted in Blackmore churchyard.

Birdsong records for Blackmore churchyard

	8 May 2026: Dawn Chorus. Sunrise 0517			9 June 2026: Count on Nature Survey		15 June 2026: rain
	0436-0446	0455-0505	0510-0520	0722-0727	0738-0743	0811-0816
	Walking	Porch	Porch	Porch	Neame	Porch
Blackbird	1	6	10			
Blackcap	6	2	5		4	10
Blue Tit	8	13	9		5	7
Carrion Crow			8	4		11
Chaffinch					7	1
Chiffchaff		10	15		1	
Collared Dove			12			
Dunnock	9					
Firecrest			14			
Goldfinch						6
Great Tit	4	5	4		6	
Greenfinch			6			
Jackdaw		4	7	1		9
Long-tailed Tit					2	
Magpie		11	13			5
Nuthatch		9				
Pheasant	7	12	11			
Robin	2					3
Song Thrush		8				8
Stock Dove		7	3	2		
Wood Pigeon	5	1	2		3	4
Wren	3	3	1	3	6	2

Simple churchyard bird checklist

Species	Where to look	Best season	Your notes / date heard
Robin	Ivy, shrubs	All year	8.5.26
Wren	Dense cover	All year	8.5.26, 9.6.26
Blackbird	Lawns, edges	All year	8.5.26
Dunnock	Hedges, ground	All year	8.5.26
Blue Tit	Trees	All year	8.5.26, 9.6.26
Great Tit	Trees	All year	8.5.26, 9.6.26
Long-tailed Tit	Hedges, trees	Autumn–winter	9.6.26
Goldfinch	Treetops, seeds	All year	15.6.26
Woodpigeon	Trees, lawns	All year	8.5.26
Jackdaw	Tower, trees	All year	8.5.26, 9.6.26
Starling	Short turf	Autumn–winter	

Species	Where to look	Best season	Your notes / date heard
Pied Wagtail	Paths, lawns	All year	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Mature trees	Spring	Late March 2026, drumming on bell tower weathervane

If you want to see more birds (wildlife-friendly churchyards)

- **Keep a rough edge.** Leaving a strip of longer grass and seed heads along boundaries can boost insects and winter food.
- **Value ivy.** Where safe for stonework and trees, ivy provides late flowers, winter berries, and dense roost cover.
- **Retain dead wood where safe.** Log piles and standing dead branches (only where risk-free) support insects that feed birds.
- **Plant or maintain berry sources.** Holly, native hedgerow shrubs, and yew (where already present) help in autumn and winter.
- **Quiet corners matter.** A small undisturbed patch can be a nesting refuge in spring.

Notes and further reading

For deeper dives, see guidance from the British Trust for Ornithology on birds and churchyards, and the Church of England's churchyard wildlife resources. For local context, Essex Wildlife Trust and the Essex Birdwatching Society publish Essex-focused information on bird species and habitats.