

**Courtyard Farm  
Breeding Bird Survey 2022**



*Quail*

**John Williamson**

# Courtyard Farm

## Breeding Bird Survey 2022

### **Weather**

March opened with a spell of wet and blustery weather with a predominantly south-westerly airflow including very strong winds over the first weekend. Thereafter a spell of settled, dry cyclonic weather predominated with lighter winds and temperatures reaching at least 10°C daily. From mid-month high pressure continued to bring settled, warm and dry conditions with light north-easterly winds and daytime temperatures reaching 18°C before the month ended with a return to a colder, and at times wet and windy weather from the north-west, with occasional snow and sleet showers.

April opened with a continuation of the cool and blustery theme before a return to a south-westerly airflow during the first week brought milder, overcast conditions. By the end of the second week a high pressure system was building bringing warmer, settled weather with daytime temperatures again reaching 15-19°C before the wind returned to the north-east in the last week of the month and cooler temperatures returned.

The beginning of May finally saw a little respite from the predominantly northerly airflow with more variable and generally lighter winds, slowly warming temperatures and finally some significant rainfall on 4<sup>th</sup>. The month continued mainly dry with variable winds until a south-westerly airflow from the third week in the month and the drought was finally broken as low pressure brought some pulses of rain.

June opened as May closed with settled warm and sunny weather with just the odd shower. By the middle of the month the dominant airflow was from the northern quarter and was variable bringing more frequent spells of rain from the north-west, often associated with blustery winds. By the final week of the month a south-westerly airflow had returned, again associated with blustery conditions but with temperatures reached around 18°C.

July opened with continued blustery but warm south-westerly winds. Precipitation remained very scarce as high pressure and heat built during the second week of the month. This period culminated in a short-lived but brutal series of cloudless skies when record temperatures were recorded at the end of the third week, reaching 38°C during the afternoon and barely dropped below 28°C overnight. The month closed with continued dry and settled weather, though a cooling predominantly north-easterly breeze reduced daytime temperatures to between 20-28°C.

### **Methodology**

The survey was a follow-up to previous survey work in 2004 by Ashley Murray, in 2005 by James McCallum, and in 2006-2020 by John Williamson. As far as possible the same observation and recording methods have been followed to allow for direct year on year comparison. British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Common Bird Census (CBC) techniques formed the basis of the recording methodology and some follow-up observations were made where required to ensure that as far as possible, nothing was missed.

As in previous years, during the field work the farm was surveyed in two sections, a northern section and a southern section, conveniently split by the route of the Ringstead to Burnham Road. Each pair of visits consisted of each of the two sections being surveyed for

a four hour period - where weather allowed, each pair of visits was made on the same day or on consecutive days.

## Results

The species maps are presented in the form of northern and southern sections on facing pages of a double-page spread. For several of the recorded species this form of presentation enables a direct comparison between the more sheltered woodland and extensive substantial hedgerows of the southern section and the more exposed higher ground and less substantial hedgerows and woodland of the northern section.

A small number of less significant breeding species were not mapped as they have either not previously been recorded as breeding birds on the farm, or they are too difficult to survey comprehensively in the time allocated. An assessment of these species will be documented in the following Classified List.

It should also be remembered that for most species the survey only indicates the number of singing males or males holding territory and will not be an exact representation of the number of breeding females of each species. For some species, most notably Jackdaw, Stock Dove and Feral Pigeon it is often possible to count a number of occupied nest holes or nests.

Following the recent re-classification of breeding birds in the UK by the major conservation bodies under the *Birds of Conservation Concern 5*, a total of eight Red-listed species bred (or held territory) at Courtyard Farm in 2022: Grey Partridge, Skylark, Mistle Thrush, Starling, House Sparrow, Linnet, Yellowhammer and Corn Bunting. Turtle Dove remains absent since 2020.

Of those eight species Linnet increased  $\geq 25\%$  and Skylark increased  $\geq 10\%$  over the year. Both Grey Partridge and Corn Bunting declined by  $\geq 25\%$ . The remaining species, namely Mistle Thrush, Starling, House Sparrow and Yellowhammer remained stable (it should be noted that in most cases the sample size is very small and any losses or gains may be represented by large percentage changes).

Twelve Amber-listed species bred (or held territory) at Courtyard Farm in 2022 (Mallard, Shelduck and Meadow Pipit were absences from those recorded in 2020): Quail, Moorhen, Sparrowhawk, Woodpigeon, Stock Dove, Tawny Owl, Dunnock, Wren, Song Thrush, Whitethroat, Willow Warbler and Bullfinch.

Of those twelve species Quail increased by  $\geq 25\%$  and Wren increased  $\geq 10\%$  (and Woodpigeon showed a small increase). Bullfinch showed a decline of  $\geq 25\%$  (whilst Whitethroat also showed a small decline). All other species, namely Moorhen, Sparrowhawk, Stock Dove, Tawny Owl, Dunnock, Song Thrush and Willow Warbler remained stable.

Whilst not encompassing some recent changes to the Systematic List order recognised by the International Ornithological Council, for ease of year-on-year comparison the original order of the Systematic List in these reports remains in use.

Thus, the results of the Courtyard Farm Breeding Bird Survey 2022, once again compiled by John Williamson, are presented as follows:



# Courtyard Farm Breeding Bird Survey 2022

## Classified List

### *Full list of all species recorded during the field survey work*

*(Non-breeding species below are in bold-italics, whilst breeding species, i.e. those singing or holding territory, are in bold)*

***Greylag Goose:*** two flew low south-west over Barn Breck on April 20<sup>th</sup> and a skein of 12 flew south over Bush Breck on July 10<sup>th</sup>.

***Grey Heron:*** one flew north over Bell's Charity on April 27<sup>th</sup>, rapidly losing height as it passed overhead, presumably heading for the farm reservoir just north of the survey area.

***Shelduck:*** a vocal pair was noted in flight over Clapper Hill and High Dual on March 12<sup>th</sup>. Presumably the same pair was again prospecting on April 5<sup>th</sup>, this time over Landing Strip.

***Mallard:*** a total of 9 males were on or around the Paddock Pond on April 5<sup>th</sup> when a pair was noted in the small field to the east of the orchard but by April 13<sup>th</sup> just 5 males were present on the Paddock Pond.

There were still 5 males present on Paddock Pond on May 22<sup>nd</sup> with no sign of any ducklings to confirm breeding.

***Red-legged Partridge:*** a total of 21 territories were identified, 6 in the northern section and 15 in the southern section (see species map). This represents a continued decrease of c.16% on the data for 2021 (25 territories) which itself was a striking decrease of c.22% on the data for 2020 (32 territories). The continued absence of releases of captive-bred Red-legged Partridge on adjacent land since 2020 appears to continue to be a major contribution to this significant reduction.

Very few broods were seen during mid-late summer, most of which consisted of relatively small numbers of young, suggesting below average breeding success and hinting at a possible continued decline in the following season.

***Grey Partridge:*** a total of 6 territories were identified, 2 in the northern section and 4 in the southern section (see species map). This unfortunately represents a 25% decline on the data recorded for 2021 (8 territories) and is a return to the levels of 2020 (6 territories). Whilst this remains a mere fraction of the former breeding population there is a suggestion that the cessation of releases of Red-legged Partridge and Common Pheasant on adjacent land has aided some level of recovery in this species.

Two broods consisting of 2 and 5 small young were seen during late-summer, suggesting that breeding success remains problematical.

***Quail:*** a male was calling from Common South on the evening of June 26<sup>th</sup> and again on the evening of July 4<sup>th</sup>, when a second male was also calling simultaneously from

Jays Field on the latter date. On the evening of July 10<sup>th</sup> there were 2 (possibly 3) males calling from Common North and Common South and again early on July 15<sup>th</sup>. On the evening of July 20<sup>th</sup> another was heard on Bush Breck, perhaps a fourth calling male.

This data represents the best year recorded for the species on the farm and a c.33% increase on the data for 2021 (3 territories).

As a result of its secretive nature, Quail remains a somewhat elusive breeding bird in the county, and indeed throughout the UK. It is liable to larger influxes in what are referred to as 'Quail years' and has a preference for light, well-drained chalky soils and grassland or cereal crops, particularly barley. Virtually all of the spring and summer records on the farm have come from the areas of Stewardship grassland, or in adjacent cereal crops.

**Common Pheasant:** a total of just 17 territories were identified, 6 in the northern section and only 12 in the southern section. This data represents a decline of c.26% on that recorded for 2021 (23 territories) which itself represented sizeable decrease of c.29% on that for 2020 (32 territories); numbers are now apparently falling steadily from highest ever total recorded in both 2015 and 2020.

The continued absence of releases of captive-bred Common Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge on adjacent land is almost certainly the major driving force behind this notable reduction.

**Cormorant:** the only records were of 3 flying high south-west over Barn Breck on April 13<sup>th</sup>, and 2 flying high south over Bell's Charity on June 26<sup>th</sup>.

**Red Kite:** one drifted west over Common North on March 12<sup>th</sup>. Two were soaring over Top and Middle Twenty on April 20<sup>th</sup> before drifting off east. A single bird drifted west over Common North on April 26<sup>th</sup>, whilst one was over Courtyard and Top Twenty on May 4<sup>th</sup>. On May 13<sup>th</sup> 2 were over the area Bottom Breck and Barn Breck early morning whilst one was perched in the canopy of Julian's Wood on May 22<sup>nd</sup>.

On June 26<sup>th</sup> 2 were drifting over the southern section of the farm, with another noted over Upper Whins on July 4<sup>th</sup>, and on July 10<sup>th</sup> one was over Bush Breck/

**Hen Harrier:** a splendid adult male flew east over Common North and Courtyard on April 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Marsh Harrier:** once again quite scarce in the early part of spring. A male flew low south Courtyard on April 13<sup>th</sup> and a female flew low north over Barn Breck on April 20<sup>th</sup>. On April 26<sup>th</sup> 2 males were noted over the farm, one hunting over Courtyard and the other flew east over Cherry Trees.

On May 4<sup>th</sup> a male was hunting over Chalk Pit and another male flew south over Landing Strip. On May 13<sup>th</sup> a female was over Bottom Breck.

From late-May records increased, with more females being recorded as breeding adults from the nearby North-coast marshes made more frequent hunting forays inland to provide food for growing young. At this time a maximum of 3 was recorded on July 4<sup>th</sup> when a female flew high north (with prey) over Courtyard, a male was hunting over Bottom Breck and another male flew low south over Landing Strip.

The first wandering, fledged juvenile of the year was recorded on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, over Bell's Charity.

**Sparrowhawk:** a male was flushed from the hedgerow on the north side of Common North on March 12<sup>th</sup> and a female was hunting hedgerows south of Dark Wood on April 5<sup>th</sup>. On April 26<sup>th</sup> a female was soaring over the wooded shelter belt to the south of the Ringstead Road and a male was regularly seen hunting the southern section of the farm throughout May-June.

Subsequently, during early-August, two recently fledged juveniles were seen in the area of Jessica's Wood and Ringstead Common, thus presumably proving successful breeding on the farm for just the third time, and the the second in subsequent years. Additionally, it again in also appears highly likely that a pair bred in woodland just south of the farm.

**Common Buzzard:** this remains the most commonly encountered raptor in the area, being recorded on all visits. On occasions up to 6 were soaring high over the farm with both Dark Wood and Wharton's Belt being favoured areas of activity in the southern half of the farm where breeding has occurred in the past.

Successful breeding was once again proven on the farm (for the fifth successive year) with a freshly fledged juvenile seen over woodland the southern section of the farm on August 4<sup>th</sup>.

Additionally, at least 2 other breeding pairs are present on adjacent land to the farm (to the south and north-east). The local population remains both stable and healthy.

**Kestrel:** a male was hunting over Two Fourteen Acres on March 12<sup>th</sup> and was again over High Dual on April 5<sup>th</sup> with presumably the same male perched in trees beside the southern approach track on April 13<sup>th</sup>. The male was seen regularly throughout the remainder of the month and into May, whilst a female was seen on two occasions during early-May.

Sightings of the male remained regular throughout June and July but with the female absent from the farm from mid-May breeding was thought likely to have taken place somewhere nearby, but not within the survey area.

**Hobby:** one flew west over Bell's Charity on May 4<sup>th</sup> whilst 2 were soaring high above woodland on the southern boundary of the farm on May 22<sup>nd</sup>.

**Peregrine:** an adult male flew north over Cherry Trees on the unusual date of July 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Moorhen:** a pair was noted on Paddock Pond on March 12<sup>th</sup> and on May 22<sup>nd</sup> they were seen with a least 3 well grown young in the Paddock surrounding the pond.

**Oystercatcher:** two were feeding on Landing Strip on April 5<sup>th</sup> and were presumably those seen later the same morning in excited display flight over Two Fourteen Acres. On April 13<sup>th</sup> a pair was seen in flight over Horse Breck and on April 20<sup>th</sup> a pair flew high south-west over Home Twenty early evening.

One was calling as it flew south-east over Home Twenty on May 4<sup>th</sup> with occasional sightings of single birds presumably relating to a pair breeding just to the north of Bell's Charity in the vicinity of Thornham Reservoir.

**Lapwing:** very scarce in spring when one was seen flying east over Bottom Breck on April 20<sup>th</sup>.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> a flock of 6 was seen flying west over Barn Breck, presumably the first returning birds of the autumn. A further flock of 8 flew west over Upper Whins on July 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Golden Plover:** a flock of 11 flew low north over Horse Breck on April 13<sup>th</sup>, the majority of the birds being in full breeding plumage.

**Dotterel:** a splendid 'trip' of 6 (3 males and 3 females) was amongst the field beans on Horse Breck before flying north-east early morning.

**Woodcock:** one was flushed from leaf litter in Julian's Wood on March 12<sup>th</sup>, the last recorded wintering bird.

**Whimbrel:** the first migrants of the spring was one calling and flying west over Courtyard on April 13<sup>th</sup>.

On April 26<sup>th</sup> a total of 12 had accumulated by evening on Common North and Jay's Field. On the morning of May 4<sup>th</sup> a flock of 4 were feeding on Common North and on May 13<sup>th</sup> one was feeding amongst the cowslips on Common North before flying west late morning.

The Stewardship grassland on Courtyard, and particularly on Common North, prove attractive this elegant spring passage wader in small numbers every year. Numbers often build throughout the day as new birds arrive, before all head off to the west in the evening, presumably to roost on the Wash overnight.

**Curlew:** one was feeding on Home Twenty on April 5<sup>th</sup>. On April 13<sup>th</sup> presumed pairs were noted on Chalk Pit, Horse Breck, Common South and Two Fourteen Acres, when a total of 9 were present with a single on Upper Whins.

The final record of the spring was a group of 3 feeding on Common North with Whimbrel on the evening of April 26<sup>th</sup>.

**Black-headed Gull:** with the removal of the pig-rearing unit gulls generally became much scarcer. Only c.40 were present there on March 12<sup>th</sup>, one or two adults now sporting the brown hoods of full breeding plumage.

By April 5<sup>th</sup> numbers remained fairly stable, the majority of which were now in full breeding plumage. On April 13<sup>th</sup> around 60 were feeding on Horse Breck with smaller numbers flying south-west towards adjacent pig-rearing units south of the Ringstead Road.

Numbers were much diminished during the summer. With the absence of the pig-rearing unit that proved a major attraction only low double-figure counts were recorded. During this period maxima of c.15 birds were recorded, including several 2<sup>nd</sup>-calendar year birds.

**Mediterranean Gull:** three pairs of splendid summer-plumaged drifted south-west towards adjacent pig-rearing units on neighbouring land on March 12<sup>th</sup>, their evocative call instantly recognisable as they passed overhead. On March 21<sup>st</sup> a total of 10 (5 pairs) were seen in flight south over the farm towards the adjacent pig units.

On April 5<sup>th</sup> a total of 6 were present; all adults in full breeding plumage and all associating with Black-headed Gulls loafing on arable. On April 13<sup>th</sup> a total of 8 (4 pairs of adults) were calling as they flew south-west towards adjacent pig-rearing units south of the Ringstead Road, with another 3 adults seen on the same trajectory on April 26<sup>th</sup>.

By May numbers had reduced and on May 4<sup>th</sup> a single adult flew south-west over Barn Breck, calling loudly as usual, whilst 2 adults flew south-west over Landing Strip on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. Odd adult birds continued to be recorded throughout June, but numbers remained low.

The former colony that briefly bred at nearby RSPB Titchwell continues to occupy the Scolt Head ternery where over 140 pairs are now present. The ravages of Avian Influenza have affected the colony this year but it doubtless the source of the birds recorded on the farm as they continue to commute to-and-from the pig-rearing units to the south of the farm.

**Common Gull:** only small numbers were hunting over the Stewardship grassland on March 12<sup>th</sup> when perhaps 35 were present on the entire farm; all birds were summer-plumaged adults.



By April 5<sup>th</sup> numbers had fallen even further, the majority of adults now having departed, when just 11 were noted including one 2<sup>nd</sup>-calendar year bird. By April 13<sup>th</sup> just 5 were noted, all feeding on Horse Breck.

From mid-April just a few 2<sup>nd</sup>-calendar year birds were present on the arable with a maximum of 5 noted on April 26<sup>th</sup>.

**Lesser Black-backed Gull:** remains relatively scarce and with the cessation of the pig-rearing units it will doubtless continue to be so. On April 5<sup>th</sup> two adults flew low south over Landing Strip, and on April 13<sup>th</sup> four adults flew north over Horse Breck.

**Herring Gull:** the cessation of pig-rearing on the farm has also greatly reduced the number of this species recorded. On March 15<sup>th</sup> a total of just 8 individuals were present, around half of which were breeding plumaged adults.

By April 5<sup>th</sup> numbers had risen to 18, the majority of which were immatures; all were loafing on arable fields with Black-headed and Common Gulls. By April 13<sup>th</sup> numbers had diminished further with just a few immatures flying south-west overhead and 2 adults feeding on Landing Strip.

Small numbers of predominantly immature birds continue to visit the pig-rearing units to the south of the farm, but numbers remained very low on the farm throughout June and July.

**Stock Dove:** a total of just 5 territories were identified, 2 in the northern section and just 3 in the southern section (see species map). This represents parity in both numbers and distribution with the data from both 2020 and 2021 (5 territories).

This data represents a mere shadow of the peak breeding population of 42 territories recorded in both 2010 and 2011. The few remaining nest-sites are restricted to the farm buildings, cattle shelters and nest-boxes, with very few natural tree-holes. The Jackdaw and Feral Pigeon populations both remain problematical to this species in the form of nest-hole/site competition.

**Feral Pigeon:** the resident population may be slightly fewer at c.18-20 birds, several of which breed in the barn and vehicle shed complex, where there were at least 7 territories. The resident population remains relatively stable (at around 7-10 territories). Fledging success once again appeared relatively low with only a few fledged young noted.

**Woodpigeon:** a total of 95 territories were identified, 36 in the northern section and 59 in the southern section. This data represents a further very small increase of c.4% on that recorded in 2021 (91 territories). As the breeding population slowly swells, for the fourth year in succession a new peak in numbers was recorded.

Woodpigeons often sing when loafing in trees adjacent to feeding areas, possibly leading to a distorted picture of actual breeding pairs, but some were still to be seen carrying nesting material in early-August, doubtless on second (or possibly even third) broods.

**Collared Dove:** following a completely blank year in 2021 a single territory was recorded (with an additional unmated female present in spring). This hopefully represents the seed of recovery on the data recorded for the period 2017-20 (3 territories) when it was noted that numbers had apparently stabilised following a period of decline.

The peak number of territories recorded was in both 2007 and 2008 (10 territories).

**Barn Owl:** a number of sightings were recorded across the farm early in the year, centred in the vicinity of the Paddock area, adjacent to where at least one adult had overwintered in the livestock shelter. Subsequently it became apparent that an adult Barn Owl had been found dead along the Burnham Road, possibly a road casualty.

Despite this early setback, two birds (presumed to be a pair) were found roosting in the livestock shelter during nestbox checks on March 29th; a nest had been made though no eggs had yet been laid. However, confirmation of a pair being present was established on a subsequent nestbox check on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, when a clutch of 5 eggs had been laid and the female was incubating. During a final nestbox check on June 29<sup>th</sup> a brood of 3 large, healthy young were ringed.

This represents the first successful breeding on the farm since the 2019.

**Little Owl:** very irregular sightings of a single bird around the cattle shelter on the Burnham Road are once again thought to relate to one of the pair that remains just along the Burnham Road, towards Ringstead.

This single territory, just over the western boundary of the farm, represents stability with the data for 2020, with no immediate signs of a return to former strength in a species that is in decline across the county.

**Tawny Owl:** calling birds were heard during daylight hours in early-March at both Chalk Pit, and by the cattle barn on the Burnham Road.

Subsequently a total of 4 territories were located, three of which produced young. This data represents parity with that for 2021 following a c.33% increase on that recorded in 2020 (3 territories). The breeding population apparently remains stable at between 2-5 territories annually.

A nestbox check on March 29<sup>th</sup> revealed that three nestboxes were occupied; Chalk Pit (2 eggs), Wharton's Belt (3 eggs) and Dark Wood (2 eggs). A subsequent check on May 3<sup>rd</sup> revealed 3 chicks in the nest on Chalk Pit (all ringed), the nest in Wharton's Belt also had 3 young (all ringed), whilst the nest in Dark Wood contained a single young (ringed) and one old unhatched egg.

Additionally, a further territory was located just outside the southern perimeter of the farm.

**Swift:** delayed by the colder spring weather and seemingly continual north-easterly airflow further south in Europe the belated first of the year flew west over Upper Whins on May 13<sup>th</sup>, when a total of at least 8 passed through heading west.

Numbers remained low both locally and throughout the county. A total of c.25 feeding over the farm and surrounding area on July 4<sup>th</sup> easily represented the highest count of the spring and summer period.

No sizeable counts or movements were noted during the remainder of June-July.

**Green Woodpecker:** two territories were recorded, one in the northern section and another in the southern section. This data represents parity in both numbers and distribution on that recorded for 2021 (2 territories), following an increase of 100% on the data recorded for 2018-20 (1 territory).

A fledged juvenile was recorded in Dark Wood on July 24<sup>th</sup> with another in North Wood on August 4<sup>th</sup>.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker:** a total of 3 territories were recorded, 2 in the northern section and one in the southern section, representing parity in both numbers and distribution with the data recorded for 2021 (3 territories).

Although stabilising the breeding population this data remains well short of the levels recorded in both 2006 and 2007 (both 7 territories). Additionally, a further

territory was located in woodland just beyond the southern perimeter of the survey area (where breeding has been recorded previously).

**Skylark:** a total of 67 territories were identified, 31 in the northern section and 36 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a sizeable and welcome increase of c.10% on the data for 2021 (57 territories). The cessation of pig-rearing on the farm and the subsequent reversion of the land occupied by the rearing units to more suitable Skylark habitat are believed to be the reasons for this welcome increase. It follows hot-on-the-heels of the 2021 increase of c.9% on the data recorded in 2020 (52 territories), and following 3 years of decline from 2018-2020, this data represents the best total of territories recorded since 2017 (72 territories).

As in the majority of previous years (with the exception of both 2013 and 2018, when agricultural practices and breeding birds were delayed by a very late spring) singing Skylarks were not counted after mid-May when re-laying failed breeders can cause confusion.

**Meadow Pipit:** eight were still present in cereal stubble on Fourteen Acres on March 12<sup>th</sup>. On April 13<sup>th</sup> at least 4 were feeding amongst the cowslips on Bush Breck.

**Sand Martin:** traditionally one of the first migrants to arrive in the county this remains the least abundant of the hirundines on the farm, with very few spring records in any year. With a generally delayed arrival due to the continued north-easterly airflow in early spring the first migrant appeared on the very late date of May 13<sup>th</sup>, when 2 flew west over Lower Whins.

Another party of 4 were recorded on May 18<sup>th</sup>, and were the only other records of the spring.

Autumn departure was noted as early as July 6<sup>th</sup> when c.12 flew west during the day. This also represented the maximum numbers recorded over the farm during the survey period.

**Swallow:** first arrival noted on May 4<sup>th</sup> when 6 flew west over the southern section of the farm during the morning. Around 20 moved west over the farm on May 13<sup>th</sup>, representing the largest passage of a poor spring.

Despite spring arrivals apparently being low in numbers, local breeding appears to have been productive as several family groups of adults and juveniles were noted feeding over the farm during July when a maximum of c.25 was noted on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

**House Martin:** first noted on May 4<sup>th</sup> when one flew west over the farm buildings. Like the other passage hirundines that pass through in spring House Martins remained scarce throughout May with a maximum of 8 moving west on 13<sup>th</sup>.

Around 15 were feeding over the farm on the evening of June 26<sup>th</sup>, easily the largest group noted during a poor spring and summer for the species.

**Yellow Wagtail:** two flew south-west over Bell's Charity on May 4<sup>th</sup>.

**Pied Wagtail:** a total of 4 territories were located, one in the northern section and 3 in the southern section. This data represents a c.33% increase on the data for 2021 (3 territories) and represents the equal highest total number of territories since as long ago as 2006.

For a species that is so associated with humans and animals it comes as no surprise that 3 of the nests were close to human habitation and the fourth was close to an animal shelter. Three nests were located in the farm building complex, the other being in the cattle shelter north of the Burnham Road.

**Wren:** a total of 58 territories were identified, 18 in the northern section and 40 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a somewhat surprising increase of c.16% on the data for 2021 (50 territories). Increases were noted in both the northern and southern sections of the farm. Overall increases have been recorded in 3 of the last 4 years and this total number of territories represents a new high, following the lowest numbers recorded immediately following the adverse late-winter weather phenomenon referred to as 'The Beast from the East' (almost doubling the 33 territories recorded in 2018).

**Dunnoek:** a total of 19 territories were located, 8 in the northern section and 11 in the southern section (see species map).

This data represents parity with that for 2022 (19 territories) which followed a small increase of c.5% on the data recorded for 2020 (18 territories). Numbers remain well below the record levels of 45 territories recorded in 2007.

**Robin:** a total of 47 territories located, 13 in the northern section and 34 in the southern section (see species map).

This data represents the fourth consecutive year of small year-on-year increases, and is c.6% up on the data recorded for 2021 (44 territories) bringing the total number of territories close to the average of 48 territories over the survey period 2006-22.

The mini-recovery from the adverse weather conditions in late-winter 2018 appears to be complete.

**Wheatear:** a single male was noted on Upper Whins on the evening of April 26<sup>th</sup>.

**Ring ouzel:** a total of 4 were present on April 13<sup>th</sup>; a male on Horse Breck and 2 males and a female calling in flight as they flew low west over Bush Breck.

**Blackbird:** a total of 43 territories were identified, 10 in the northern section and 33 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a small increase of c.10%, on that for 2021 (38 territories), which followed a decline of c.9%, on that recorded for 2019 (42 territories). The number of territories remains very close to the average number recorded during the entire survey period 2006-2022 (46 territories).

Distribution of breeding territories remains heavily biased to the wooded and scrubby areas in the southern section but the northern section accounted for half of the gains. Fledging success may well have been hampered by the dry ground during spring and summer causing a paucity of earthworms.

**Redwing:** a flock of 20 returning migrants was feeding in North Wood on March 21<sup>st</sup>; as is often the case at this time of year several of the males were indulging in collective sub-song from the uppermost branches of the tallest oak trees in the wood.

**Song Thrush:** a total of 10 territories were located, 2 in the northern section and 8 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents parity in both numbers and distribution with that recorded in both 2019-2021 (10 territories).

Few fledged young were noted and fledging success may have been hampered by the extremely dry weather during spring and summer, meaning that worms, snails and slugs will have been hard to find.

Numbers remain slightly above the average number of territories recorded during the entire survey period (8 territories).

**Fieldfare:** a small flock of 8 presumed returning migrants were on Clapper Hill on March 12<sup>th</sup>, whilst further departing birds were noted on March 21<sup>st</sup> when flocks of 10 and 27 were grounded on the northern section of the farm.

**Mistle Thrush:** a total of 2 territories were identified, 1 in the northern section and 1 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents parity in both numbers and distribution with that recorded in 2021 (2 territories).

Despite being well below the peak level of 8 territories recorded in 2008, numbers have remained stable at 2-3 territories annually since 2017.

As with Song Thrush, annual fluctuations recorded is in some part determined by the actual position of territories on adjacent land and an additional territory was located just beyond the western perimeter of the farm.

**Lesser Whitethroat:** first 2 migrants were noted on April 20<sup>th</sup> when singing males were in the hedgerow south of Common North and in the hedgerow between Common North and Jay's Field.

A total of 14 territories were located, 4 in the northern section and 10 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a small decline of c.7% on the data recorded in 2021 (16 territories). The recovery from the recent decline leading to a low of just 9 territories recorded in 2017 appears to be complete. Current numbers now reflect the average number of territories recorded during the entire survey period (2006-2022, 14 territories).

As stated in previous reports, periodic flailing of hedgerows can have an effect on the numbers and distribution of both this species and the following, temporarily reducing the amount of available habitat.

**Whitethroat:** the first migrant noted was a singing male in the hedgerow on the south side of Two Fourteen Acres on April 13<sup>th</sup>.

Poor early-spring weather deemed that numbers remained quite low until late-April when a spell of more suitable weather saw large numbers of Whitethroats arriving across the entire county.

Subsequently an impressive total of 44 territories were located, 22 in the northern section and 22 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a small decline of c.7% on the data for 2021 (47 territories). This followed a striking increase of c.30% on the data recorded for 2020 (36 territories). Current numbers remain slightly above the average number of territories recorded annually during the period 2006-2022 (42 territories).

**Blackcap:** the first spring record was of a singing male on March 21<sup>st</sup>, heard in Wharton's Belt. By April 5<sup>th</sup> a total of at least five males were in song.

A total of 45 territories were identified, 12 in the northern section and 33 in the section (see species map). This data represents a slight decrease on the data recorded for 2021 (47 territories) virtually eroding the small increase of c.7% on the data for 2020 (44 territories). Current numbers remain well above the annual average during the period 2006-2022 (47 territories).

**Garden Warbler:** the first migrants appeared on May 4<sup>th</sup> when males were singing along the green lane between Middle and Top Twenty, and between Home Piece and Two Fourteen Acres.

Subsequently 2 territories were identified, both in the southern section of the farm. This data represents parity in both numbers and distribution with the data for both 2020-2022 (2 territories) and remains at an all-time high.

With single breeding pairs recorded in the years 2006-8, 2014-16 and 2018, and 2 territories in 2020-2022, the results this year mean that Garden Warblers have now held territory in 8 out of the last 9 years.

**Chiffchaff:** the first singing males were noted on March 12<sup>th</sup>, when at least 2 birds were in both North Wood and Wharton's Belt.

An impressive total of 42 territories were located, with 13 in the northern section and 29 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a further increase on the data recorded in 2021 (38 territories). The 2022 result follows the striking increase of c.22% recorded in 2021 on the data for 2020 (31 territories) and once again establishes a new peak level.

Since a low of 16 territories in 2016 this short-distance migrant has shown continual year-on-year growth and appears to be going from strength-to-strength. Climate change driving increasingly successful over-wintering in the United Kingdom (including Norfolk) is thought to be one of the factors in this continued increase.

**Willow Warbler:** a singing male was noted in the new woodland west of the green lane on the south side of Wharton's belt on April 20<sup>th</sup>.

A single territory was located, in the southern section of the farm. This represents parity with the data recorded in 2021 (1 territory) and continues to fall within the pattern of 0-2 territories recorded annually since 2011. The peak breeding population was recorded when survey work began in 2006 (8 territories).

**Goldcrest:** a total of 4 territories were identified, all in the southern section of the farm (see species map). This data represents a second successive year-on-year increase being c.33% up on the data recorded in 2021 (3 territories).

Current trends suggest that the slow recovery from the effects of the adverse late-winter weather in 2018 continue. Current numbers are not far from the average number recorded annually 2006-2020 but remain well below the peak numbers recorded in 2009 (13 territories).

**Long-tailed Tit:** a total of 17 territories were located, 8 in the northern section and 9 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a further increase of c.13% on that recorded for 2021 (15 territories) following an increase of c.7% in 2021 on the data for both 2019 and 2020 (14 territories).

The recovery and consolidation from the lowest recorded levels of just 10 territories following the adverse late-winter weather in 2018, is both welcome and quite impressive. The Long-tailed Tit population still remains low in comparison to the peak levels recorded in 2009 (33 territories) but is now not too far below the average number of territories recorded annually during the period 2006-2022 (21 territories).

At least 3 post-breeding flocks of 5-6 young were recorded in early-July, suggesting some level of breeding success.

**Coal Tit:** a total of 5 territories were identified, one in the northern section and 4 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents an increase of c.20% on that recorded during the period 2018-2021 (4 territories).

Numbers have risen above the all-time low (4 territories) for the first time since the severe late-winter weather in 2018, but remain below both the record levels of 12 territories in 2012, and the average number of territories recorded annually during the period 2006-2022 (7 territories).

**Blue Tit:** a total of 26 territories were identified, 6 in the northern section and 20 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a small increase of c.8% on the data for 2012 (24 territories) but only partly recovers the large decline of c.27% recorded in 2021, when compared with the data recorded for 2020.

The number of Blue Tit territories recorded on the farm has fluctuated between 19 and 42 territories during the period 2006-2022, but remain at just below the average number of territories recorded annually during that period (29 territories).

Good numbers of fledged young were noted during June-July suggesting that breeding had been successful despite the very dry conditions.

**Great Tit:** a total of 21 territories were identified, 5 in the northern section and 16 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents parity in both numbers and distribution with that recorded in 2021 (21 territories).

The number of territories appears to have now stabilised at the level recorded in 2017 following a small increase as a result of the adverse weather of late-winter 2018. The overall trend since the peak of 46 territories in 2007 had been one of steady decline (albeit with a few minor fluctuations) up to 2017, but now appears to have possibly bottomed-out.

**Jay:** some evidence of re-orientation of displaced birds from the previous autumn when on April 20<sup>th</sup> a party of four flew high southwest and on May 22<sup>nd</sup> groups of 5 and 4 also flew south-west at height; all groups were calling loudly in flight.

A total of 2 territories were identified, both in the southern section. This represents parity in numbers with the data for the period 2014-2021 (2 territories). For the fourth successive year, both occupied territories were located in the southern section.

The breeding population initially fluctuated annually between 2-3 breeding pairs in the early years of survey work but has now stabilised at 2 pairs since 2014.

**Magpie:** a total of 4 territories were identified, 1 in the northern section and 3 in the southern section. This data represents parity in both numbers and distribution with that for the period both 2019-2021 (4 territories), but remains at the lowest recorded level since survey work began (2006).

**Jackdaw:** around 140 (including potential local breeding birds) were present on the farm on March 21st, predominantly commuting to-and-from the pig-rearing units to the south of the farm and the Stewardship grassland either side of the Burnham Road. Varying numbers from both the local population and those from farmland to the south continued to visit the pig-rearing units throughout the spring and summer.

A total of 16 territories were located, 2 in the northern section and 12 in the southern section. This data represents a further decrease of c.12% on the data for 2021 which showed a small decrease of c.5% on that recorded as a new all-time high in 2019 (19 territories).

It is believed that availability of nesting sites is most likely the reason for the recent decline in numbers, particularly with the old dovecote on the eastern end of the drying barn no longer being suitable.

**Rook:** a small flock of 8 flew west over Horse Breck on April 13<sup>th</sup> and 5 flew west over Barn Breck on May 4<sup>th</sup>. On May 22<sup>nd</sup> a large gathering of 42 was feeding on Courtyard and Common North in the company of many of the local Jackdaws.

**Carrion Crow:** once again a single territory was identified, in the southern section in Dark Wood. The data recorded this year replicates that during the period 2014-2021 (1 territory).

The cessation of pig-rearing on the farm may have an adverse effect on this species, though currently there is pig-rearing on adjacent land to the survey area.

Numbers during summer have traditionally often reached double figures but peaked at just 8 this year on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

**Raven:** one flew south over Ringstead Common on April 5<sup>th</sup> and the same or another was on Horse Breck on May 4<sup>th</sup>. Sightings of this recent colonist to the county are becoming more frequent.

**Starling:** light westerly passage noted on March 21st when 113 flew overhead in small flocks (maximum 25).

A single territory was located in the same old woodpecker hole in North Wood, in the northern section, that had been used the previous year. Once again a brood of young could be heard calling from the hole and duly fledged.

This represents the third consecutive successful year of breeding on the farm, prior to which there had been no breeding since 2010.

From mid-June the first small flocks of adults and recently fledged juveniles wander widely and were recorded on the Stewardship grassland and later in the harvest fields on the farm. Maximum numbers recorded at this time included 43 on July 10<sup>th</sup> and 112 on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

**House Sparrow:** once again a single territory was located on the perimeter of the farm building complex, in the southern section. This represents successful breeding on the farm for the sixth consecutive year and remains consistent with the data for 2019-2021 (1 territory).

A flock of 6, including some fledged juveniles, was seen on barley stubble on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

**Chaffinch:** a total of 76 territories were identified, 24 in the northern section and 52 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents parity with the data recorded in 2021 (75 territories) and consolidation of the welcome increase of c.10% on that for 2020 (68 territories).

The current breeding population remains very close to the average number of territories recorded annually during the period 2006-2022 (78 territories).

It is of interest that this species has to date not succumbed to the ravages of *Trichomoniasis*, the disease believed to be the major cause of the recent devastation of the Greenfinch population both on the farm and across much of the UK. The reduced numbers recorded between 2017-2020 may well have been in part due to this disease but levels appear to now be recovering.

**Brambling:** a single record of 2 birds flushed from the hedgerow on the east side of Two Fourteen Acres on March 8<sup>th</sup>.

**Greenfinch:** grimly clinging on as a breeding species on the farm just a single territory was identified, in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a further decline of 50% on that recorded for 2021 (2 territories).

With the peak number of territories recorded standing at 18 territories (2009 and 2010), and despite years of decline the average number of territories recorded annually between 2006-2020 still standing at 7 territories, this further decline suggests local extinction appears inevitable.

There remains no current evidence at Courtyard Farm, and little within the county, to suggest this species is showing recovery from the ravages of *Trichomoniasis*. Large wintering flocks of Greenfinches in cereal stubble remain extremely uncommon throughout the county.

**Goldfinch:** a total of 17 territories were identified, 8 in the northern section and 9 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a decline of c.11% on that recorded for 2021 (19 territories).



There is clearly a correlation between the numbers recorded of both this and the previous species. Numbers of Goldfinches recorded annually peaked at 21 territories in 2014, at the height of the Greenfinch collapse, and whilst fluctuating slightly each year they have remained quite stable at between 17-21 territories ever since.

**Linnet:** a total of 13 territories were recorded, 7 in the northern section and 6 in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a further increase of 30% on the data recorded for 2021 (10 territories).

Despite massive fluctuations in wintering numbers in north-west Norfolk in recent years, breeding numbers have been on the increase on the farm since 2017 (5 territories). The 13 territories recorded this year represent a new peak on the farm and comfortably also exceeds the annually recorded average during the period 2006-2022 (7 territories).

Distribution of Linnet territories on the farm is quite variable with the gorse scrub to the north of the Burnham Road (on the edge of Ringstead Common) extending to around the cow barn, remains a stronghold, but pockets of loose colonies can occur in at random in any of the hedgerows. The increase in 2022 was entirely located in the southern section of the farm.

**Bullfinch:** a total of just 2 territories were identified, both in the southern section (see species map). This data represents a decline of c.33% on that recorded for 2019-2021 (3 territories).

Numbers have now reached a new lowest level recorded since survey work commenced in 2006 and remain well below both of the 8 territories recorded in 2010, and the annual average recorded during 2006-2022 (7 territories).

**Yellowhammer:** a total of 22 territories were identified, 15 in the northern section and just 7 in the southern section (see species map). This data almost represents parity with that recorded in 2021 (22 territories) in numbers with virtually identical distribution.

Since the low of 19 territories recorded in 2018 following the adverse late-winter weather at the beginning of that year, numbers have remained stable at 21-22 territories.

Whilst the slight recovery and subsequent stabilising of numbers since 2018 offers some optimism, levels remain well below the average number of territories recorded annually during 2006-2020 currently standing at 31 territories. The peak of 42 territories in 2008 now seems a long time ago.

**Corn Bunting:** a total of 3 territories were identified, all in the northern section. This data represents a decline of 40% on that recorded for 2021 (5 territories).

The data for 2021 (5 territories) was the highest number of territories recorded since 2015 (6 territories) and represented a 40% increase on the data recorded for 2020 (3 territories), clearly indicating the annual fluctuations in this species, but also remaining firmly within the pattern of between 3-6 territories annually 2006-22 (with the exception of a blank year 2011).

Recent survey work indicated that a remnant population of breeding Corn Buntings remains extant in north-west Norfolk located in an area roughly bounded by lines drawn between Ringstead, Fring, Docking and Burnham Market, and bordered to the north by the A149 coast road. Numbers in this area remain critically low at probably less than 20 pairs.



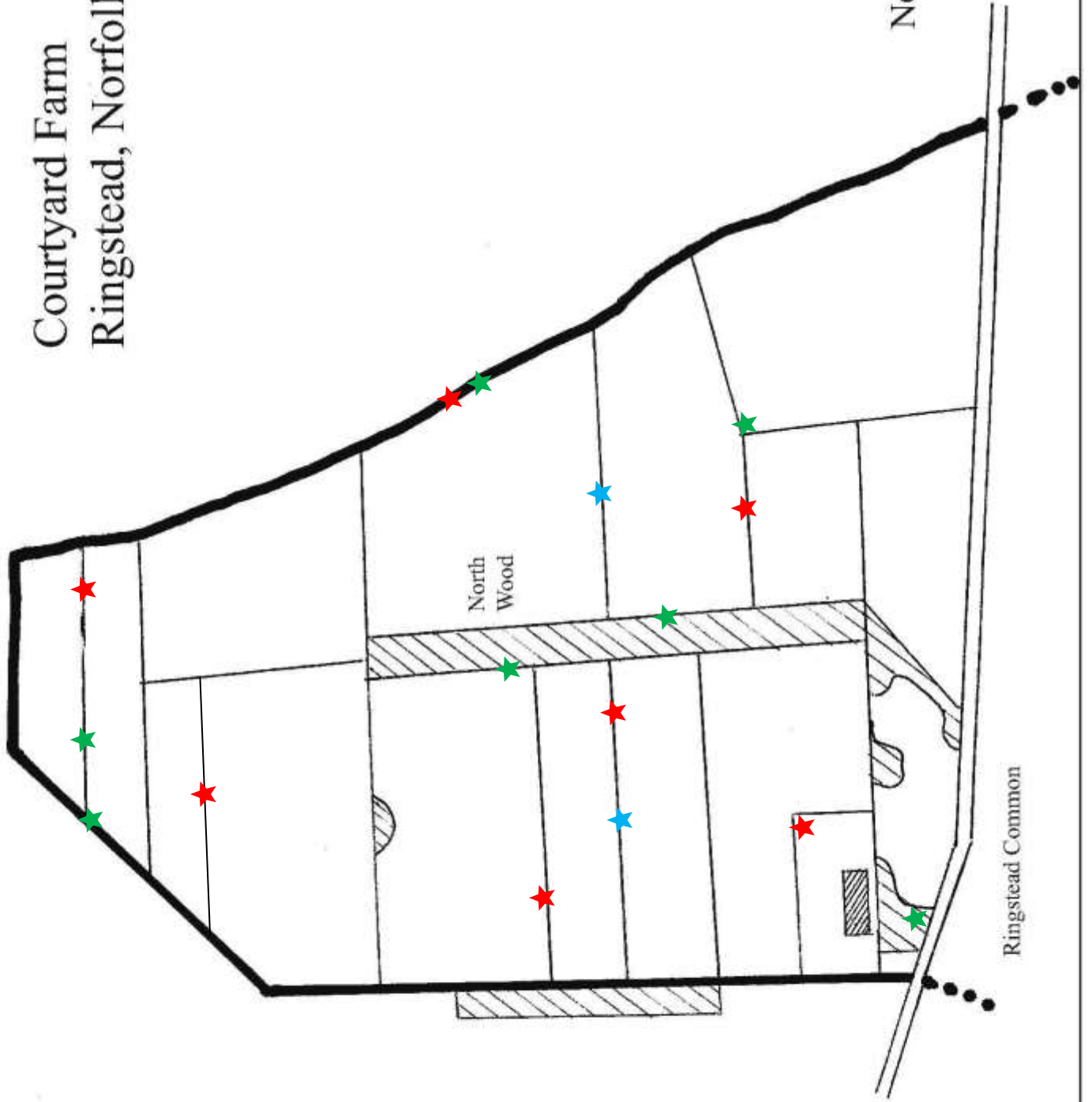
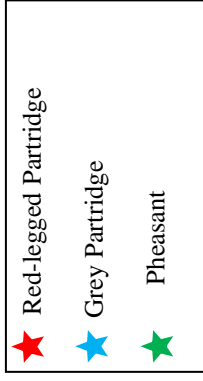
# **Courtyard Farm Breeding Bird Survey 2022**



*Lesser Whitethroat*

## **Breeding Distribution Maps**

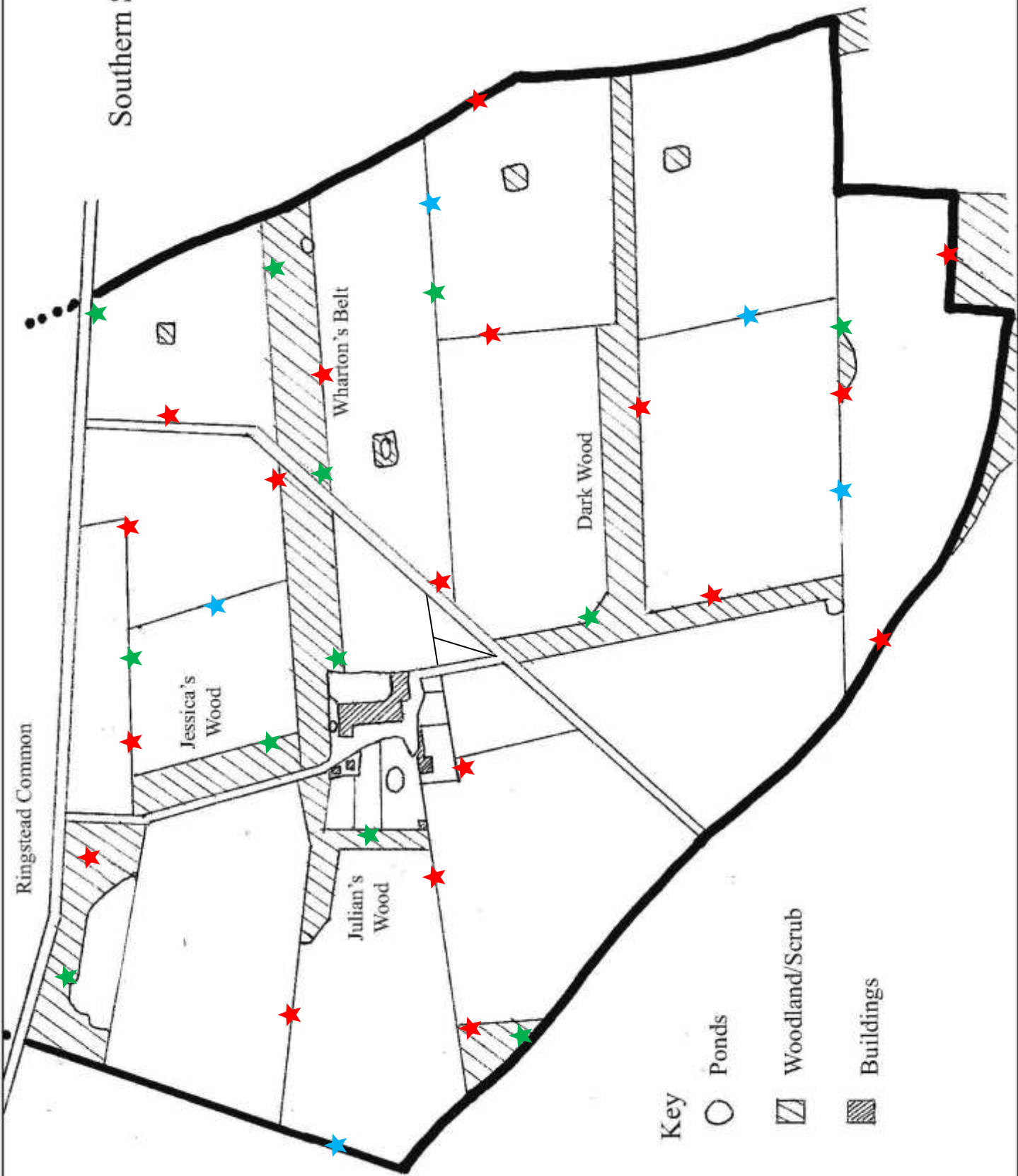
# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk



Northern Section

Ringstead Common

Southern Section



Ringstead Common

Jessica's Wood

Julian's Wood

Wharton's Belt

Dark Wood

Key

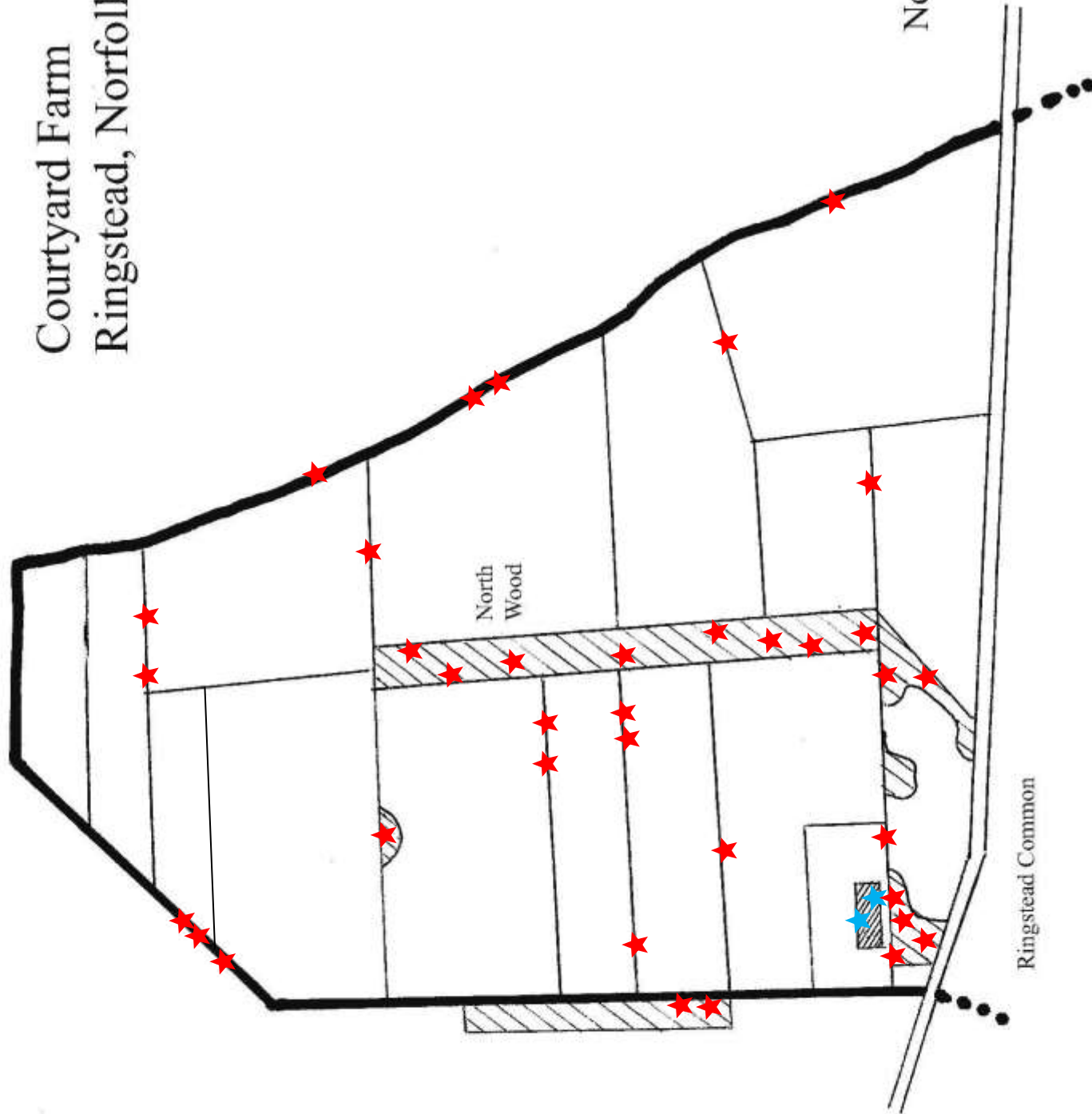
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

■ Buildings

# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

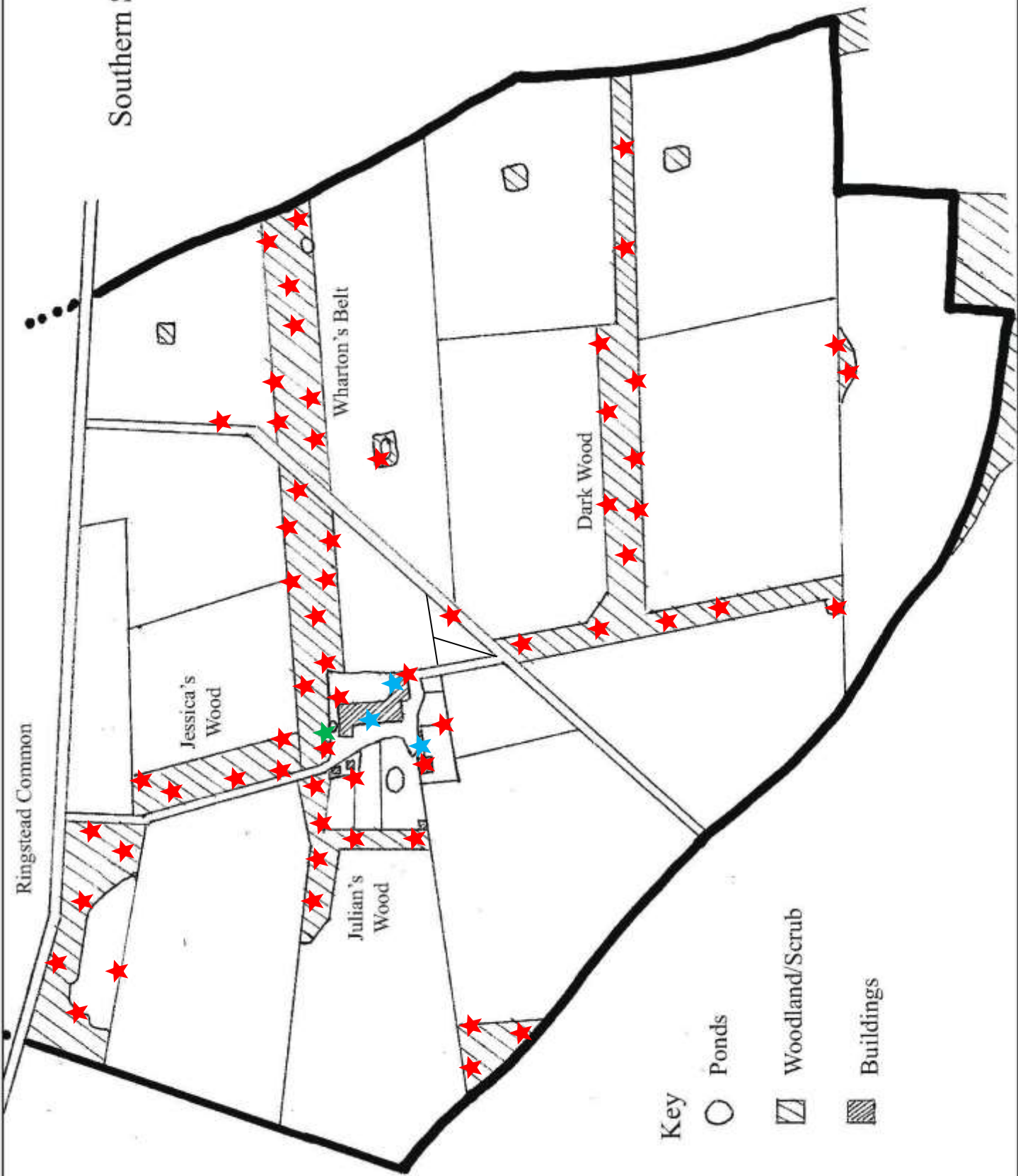
★	Woodpigeon
★	Stock Dove
★	Collared Dove



Northern Section

Ringstead Common

Southern Section



Ringstead Common

Jessica's Wood

Julian's Wood

Wharton's Belt

Darkic Wood

Key

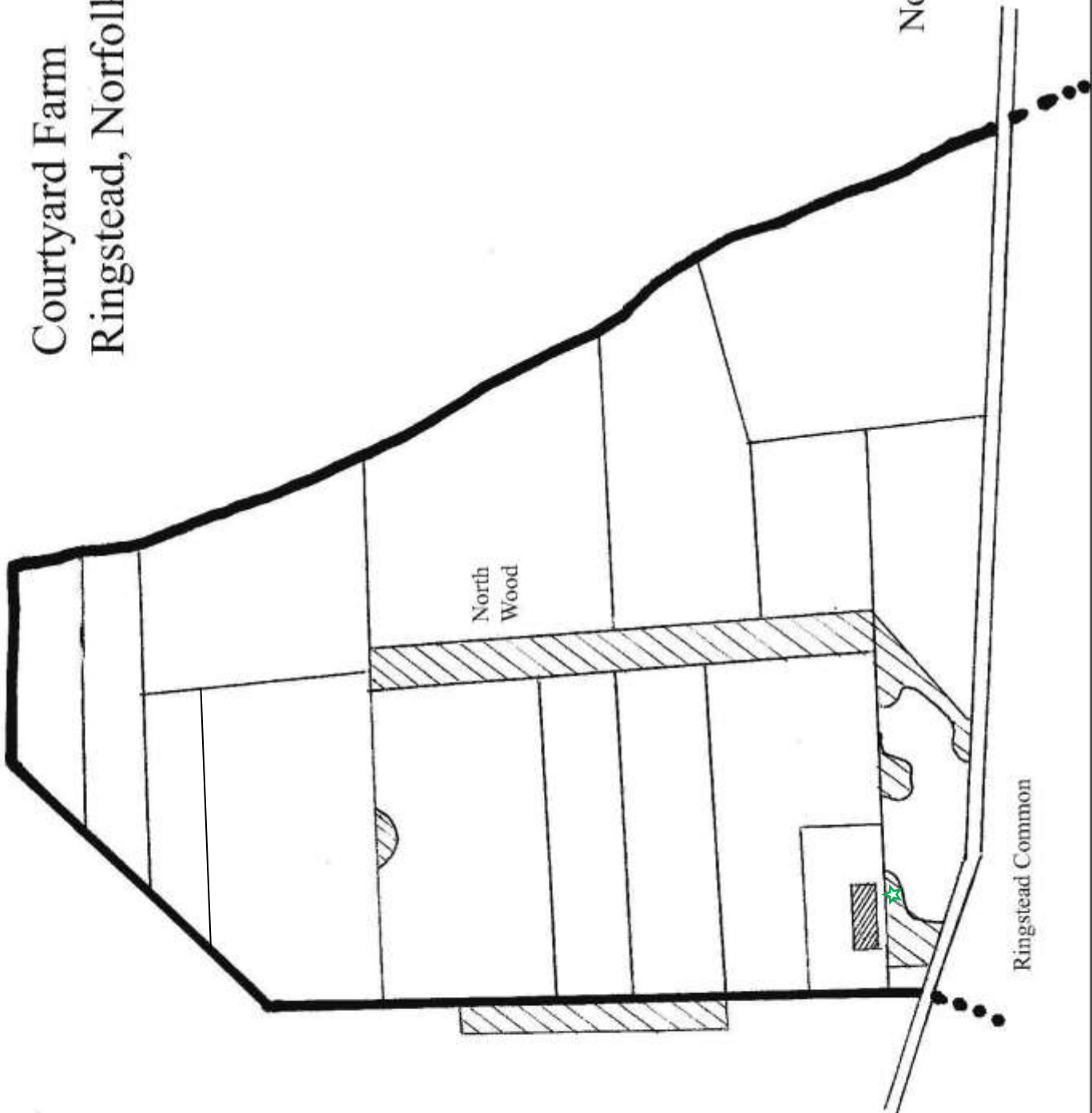
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

▩ Buildings

# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

- ★ Barn Owl
- ★ Little Owl
- ★ Tawny Owl



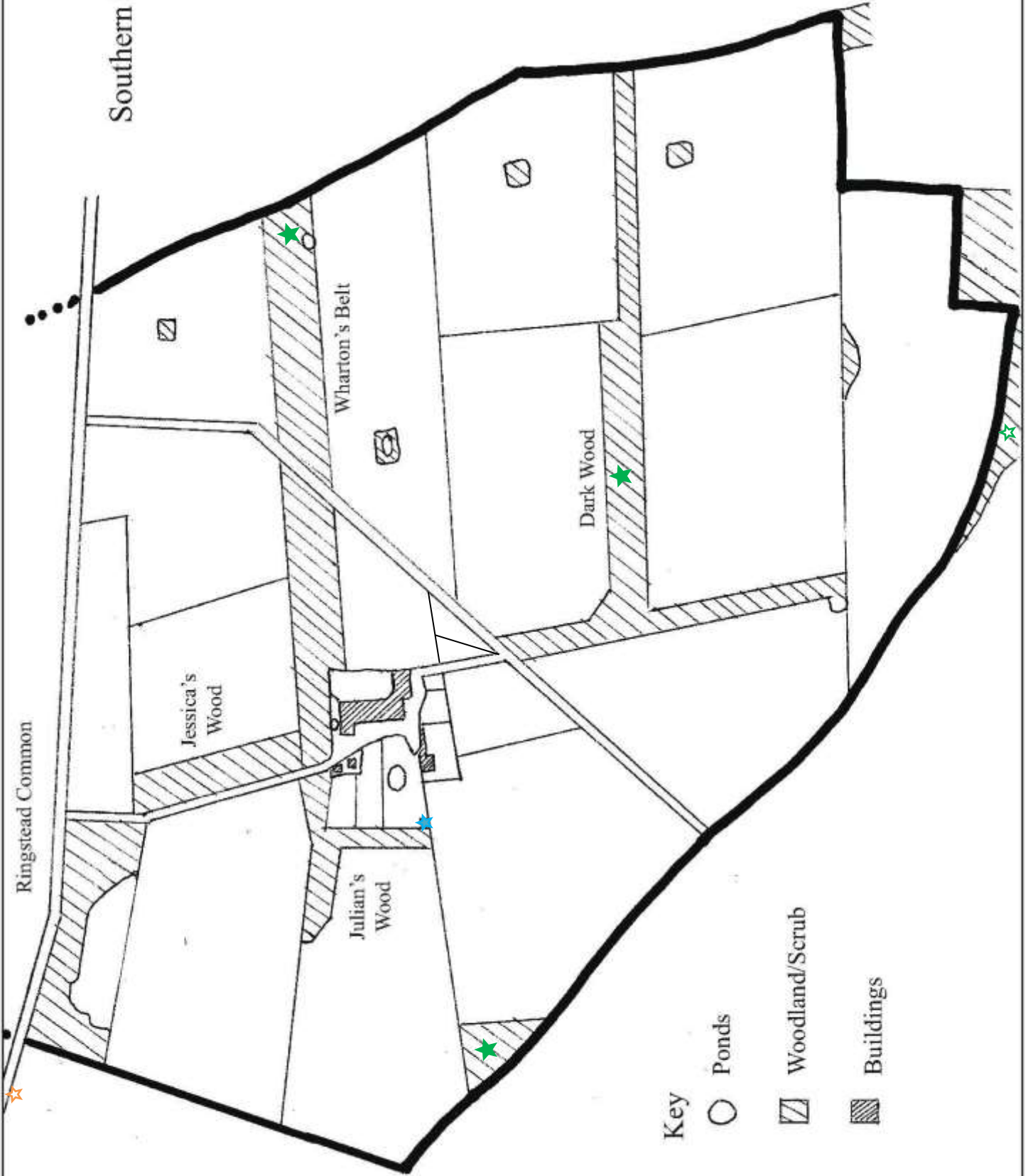
Northern Section

North  
Wood

Ringstead Common



Southern Section



Ringstead Common

Jessica's Wood

Julian's Wood

Wharton's Belt

Dark Wood

Key

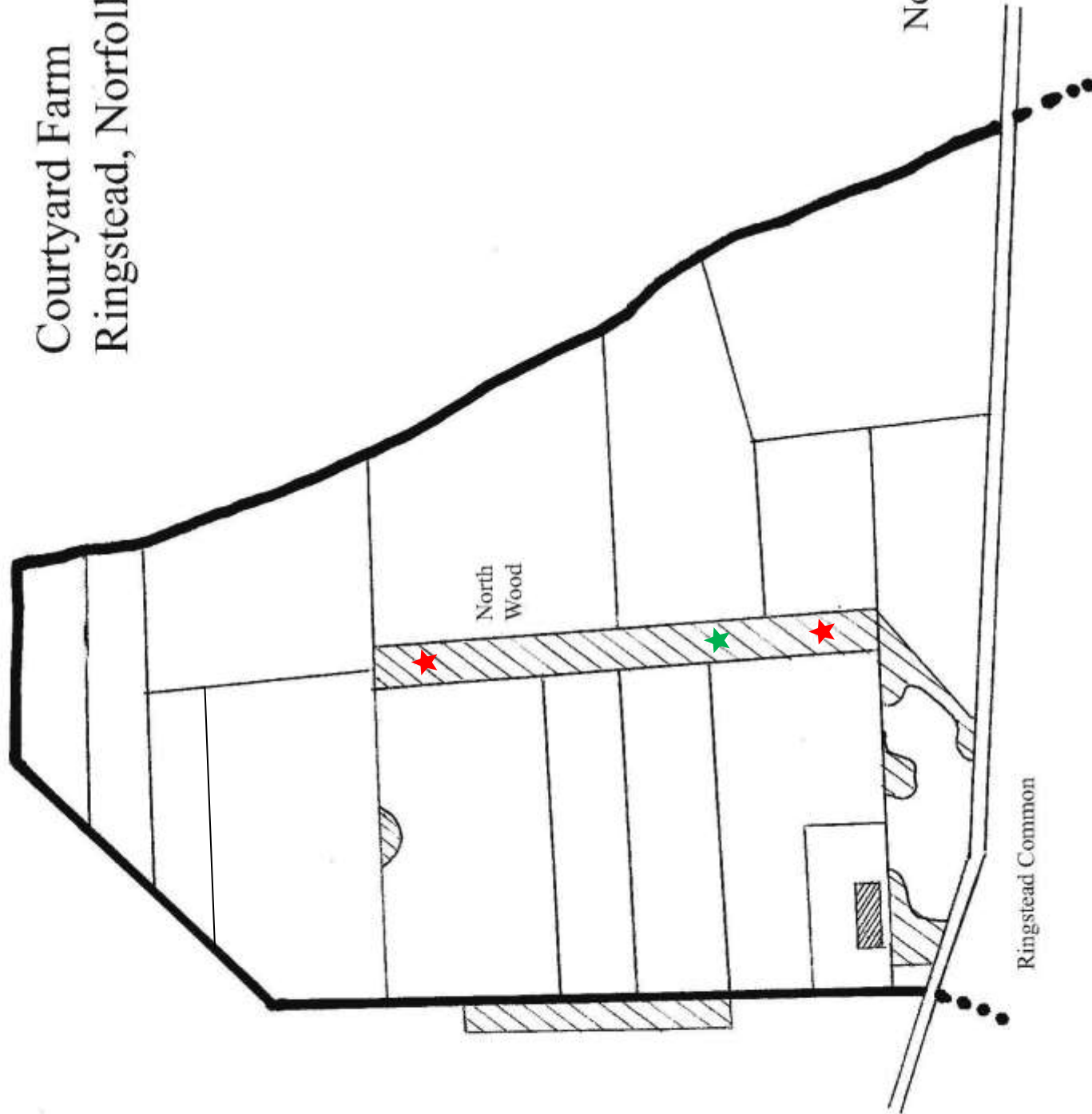
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

■ Buildings

# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

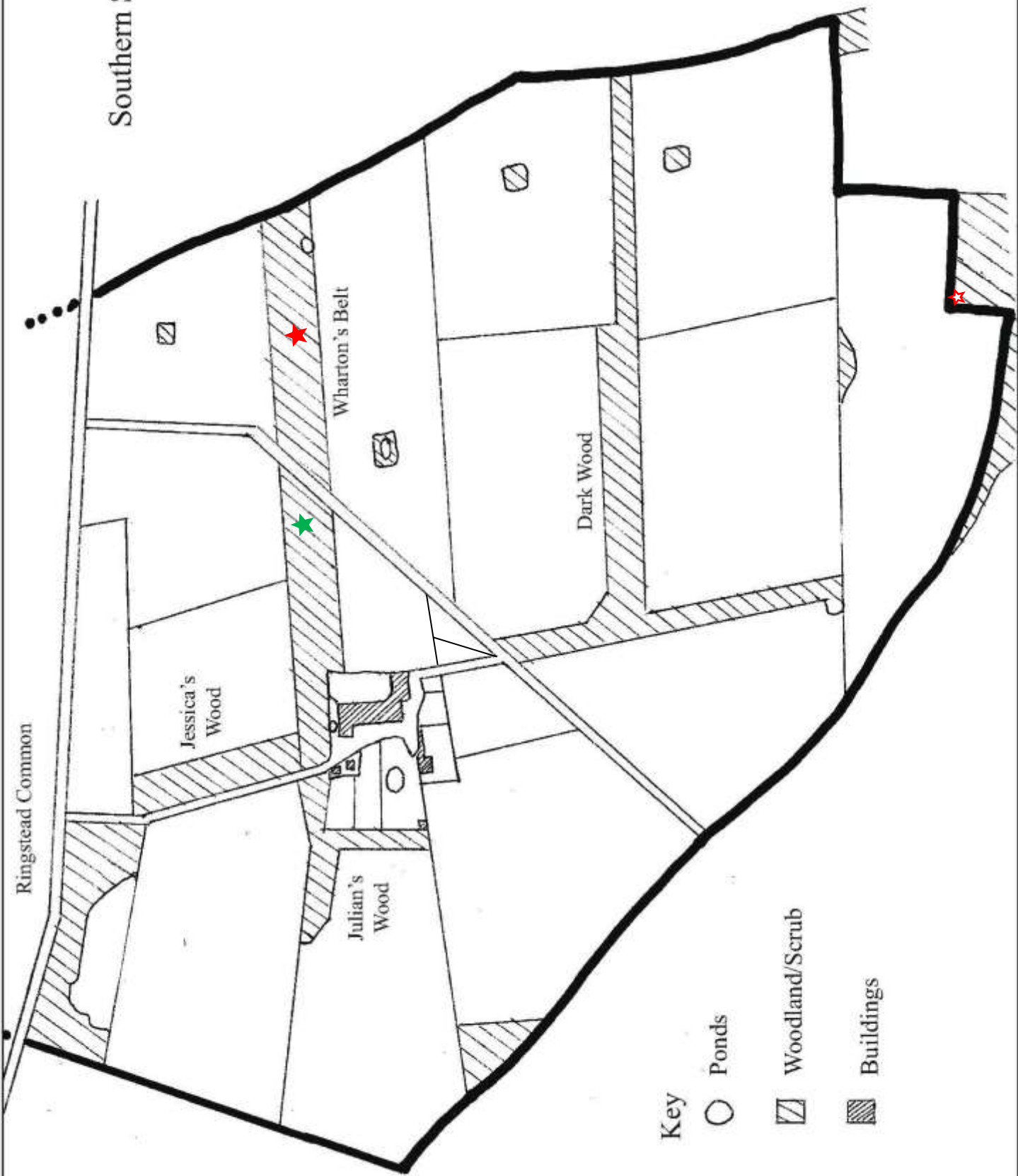
- ★ Great Spotted Woodpecker
- ★ Green Woodpecker



Northern Section

Ringstead Common

Southern Section



Ringstead Common

Jessica's Wood

Julian's Wood

Wharton's Belt

Dark Wood

Key

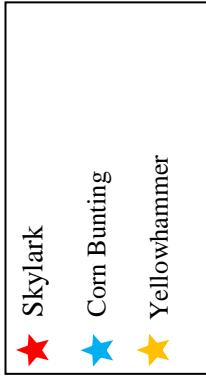
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

▩ Buildings



# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

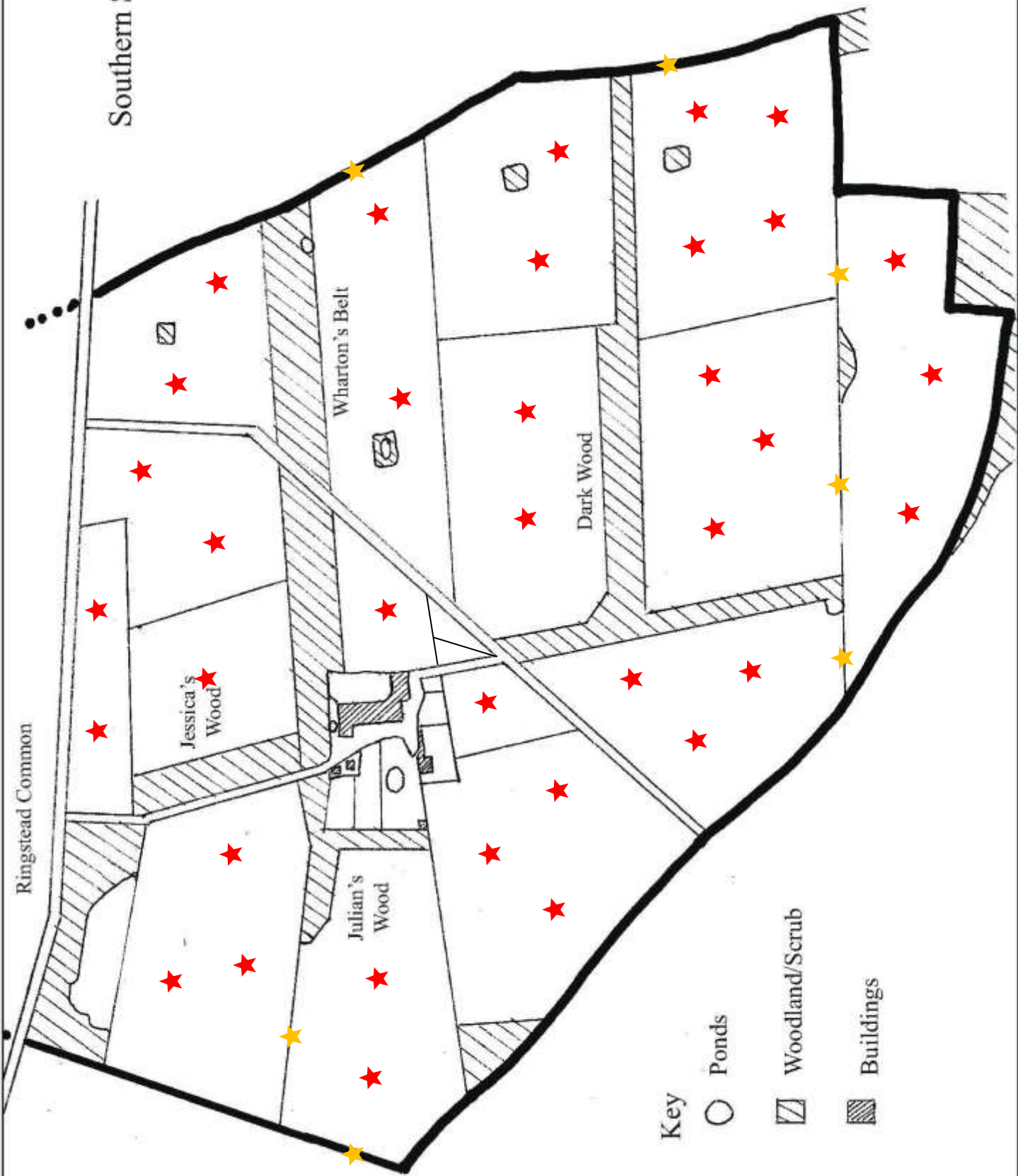


Northern Section

North  
Wood

Ringstead Common

Southern Section



Ringstead Common

Jessica's Wood

Julian's Wood

Wharton's Belt

Dark Wood




Key

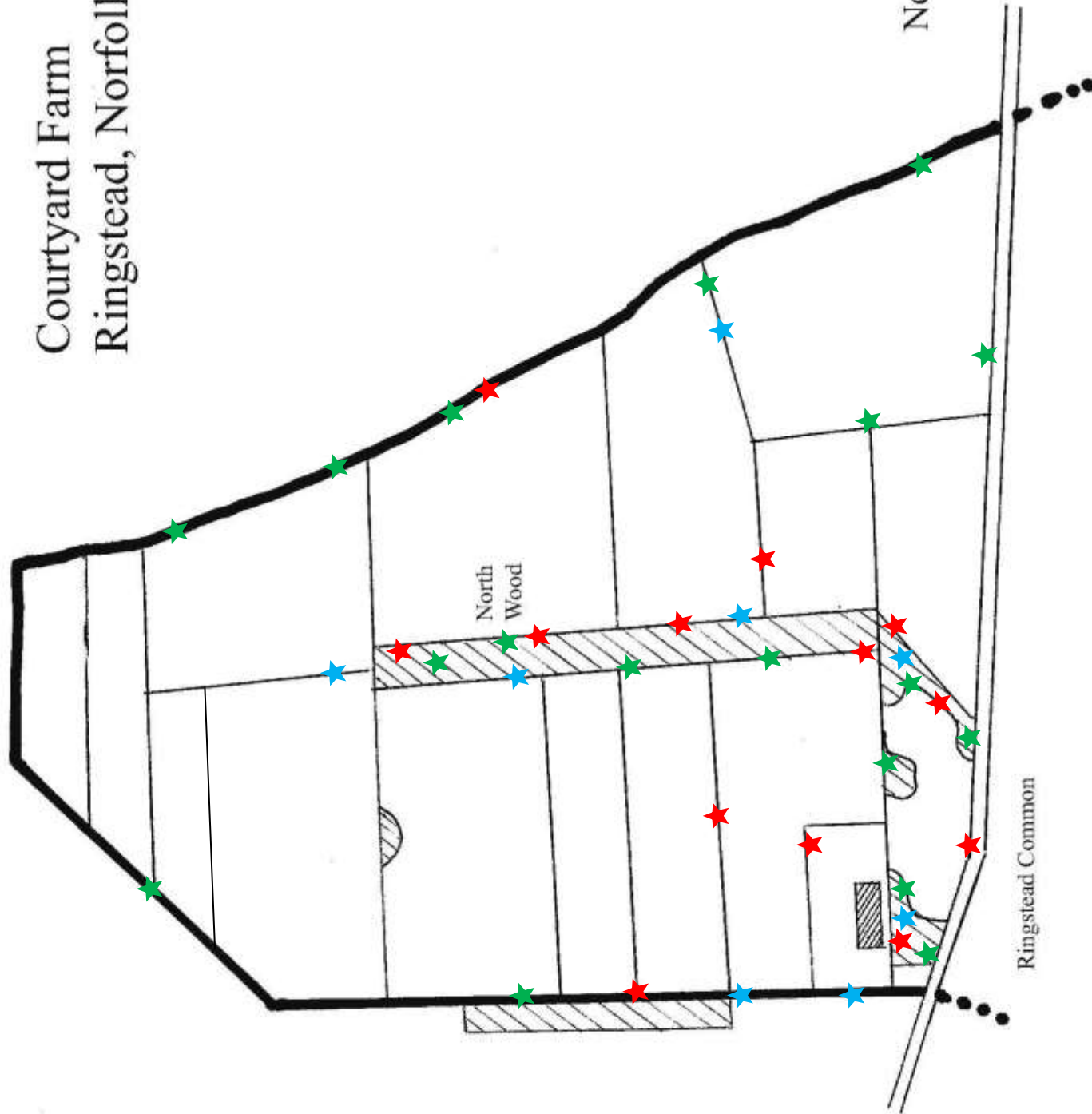
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

▨ Buildings

# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

	Robin
	Dunnock
	Wren

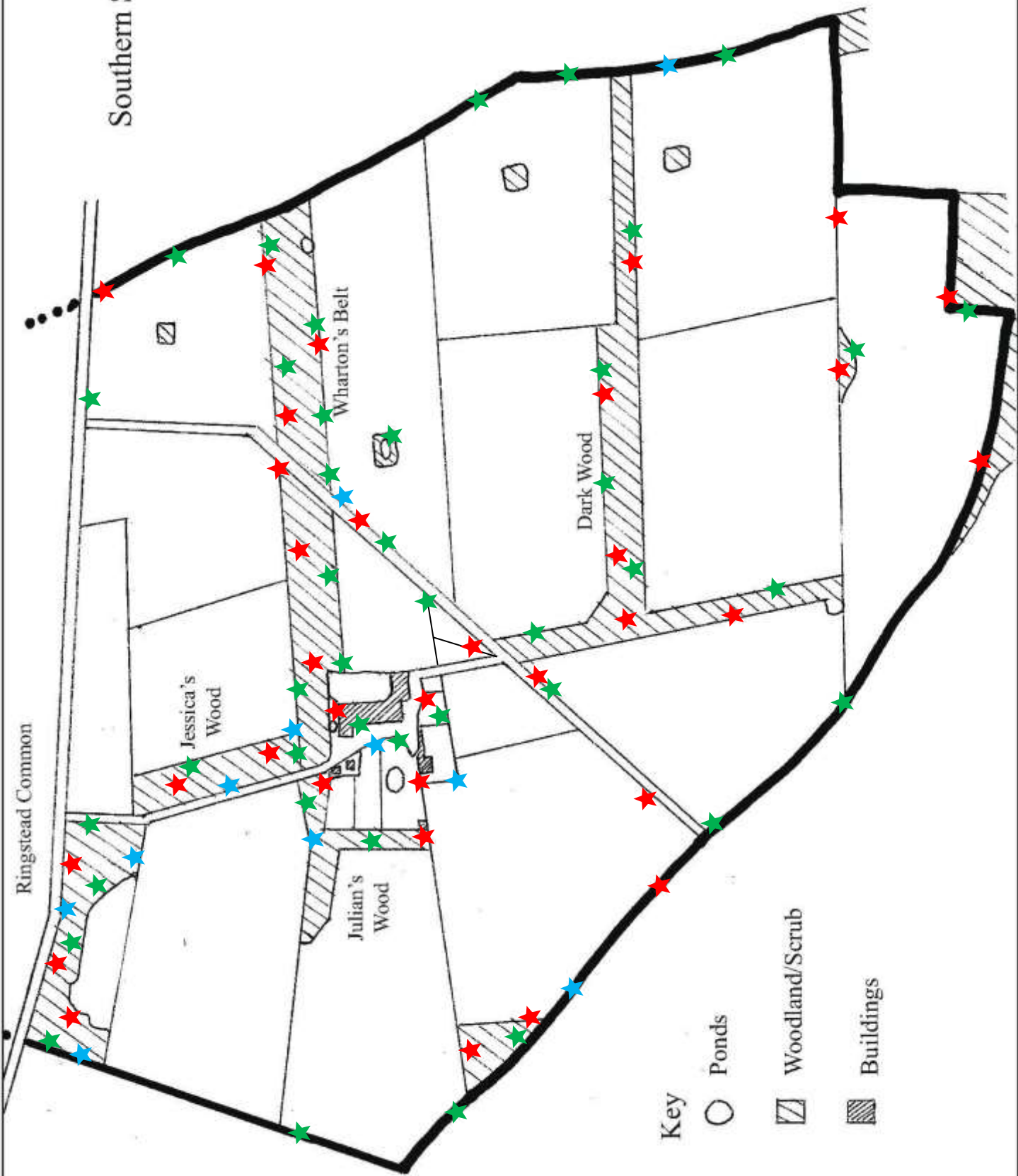


Northern Section

North Wood

Ringstead Common

Southern Section

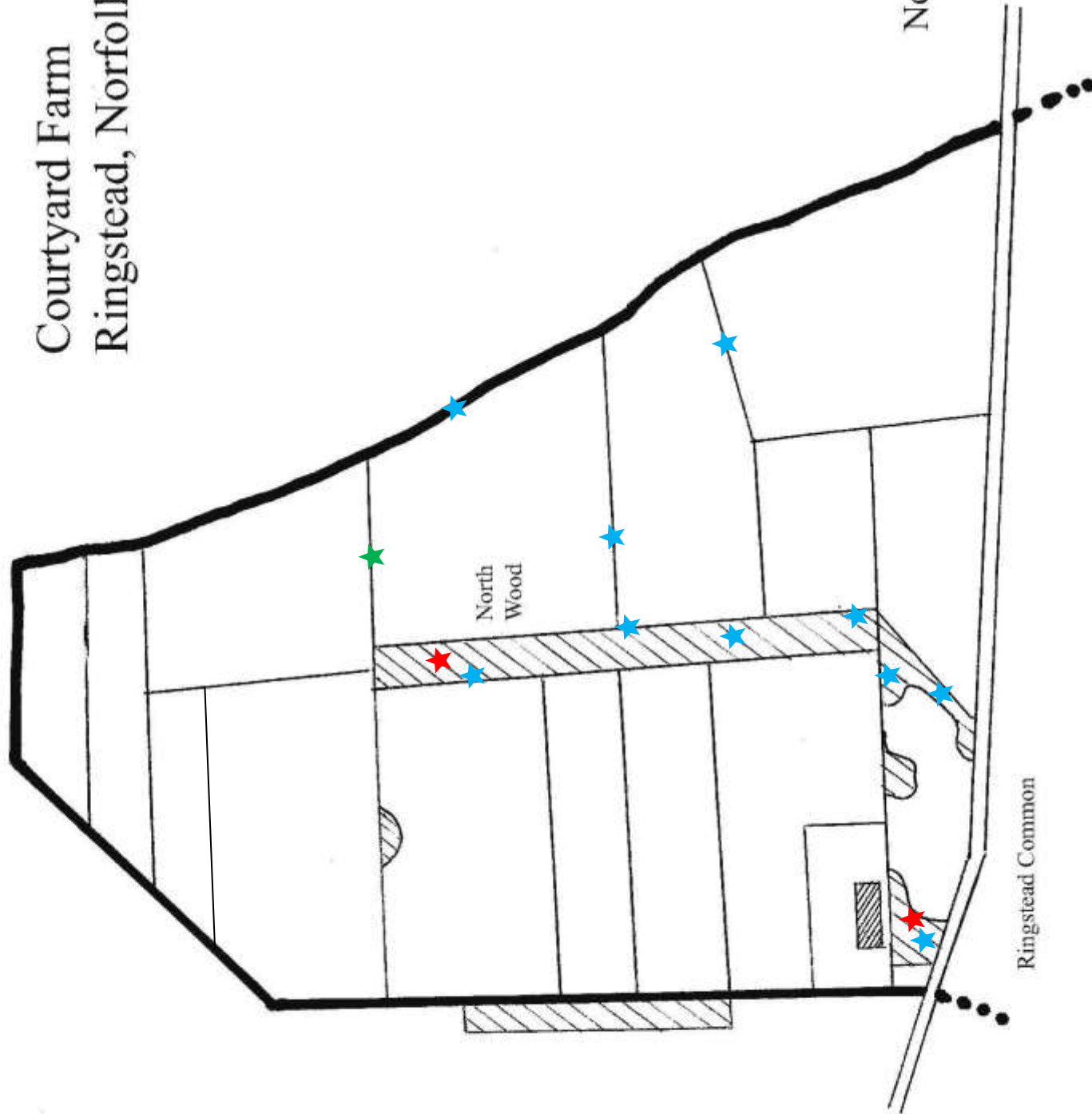


Key

- Ponds
- ▨ Woodland/Scrub
- Buildings

# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

★	Song Thrush
★	Blackbird
★	Mistle Thrush



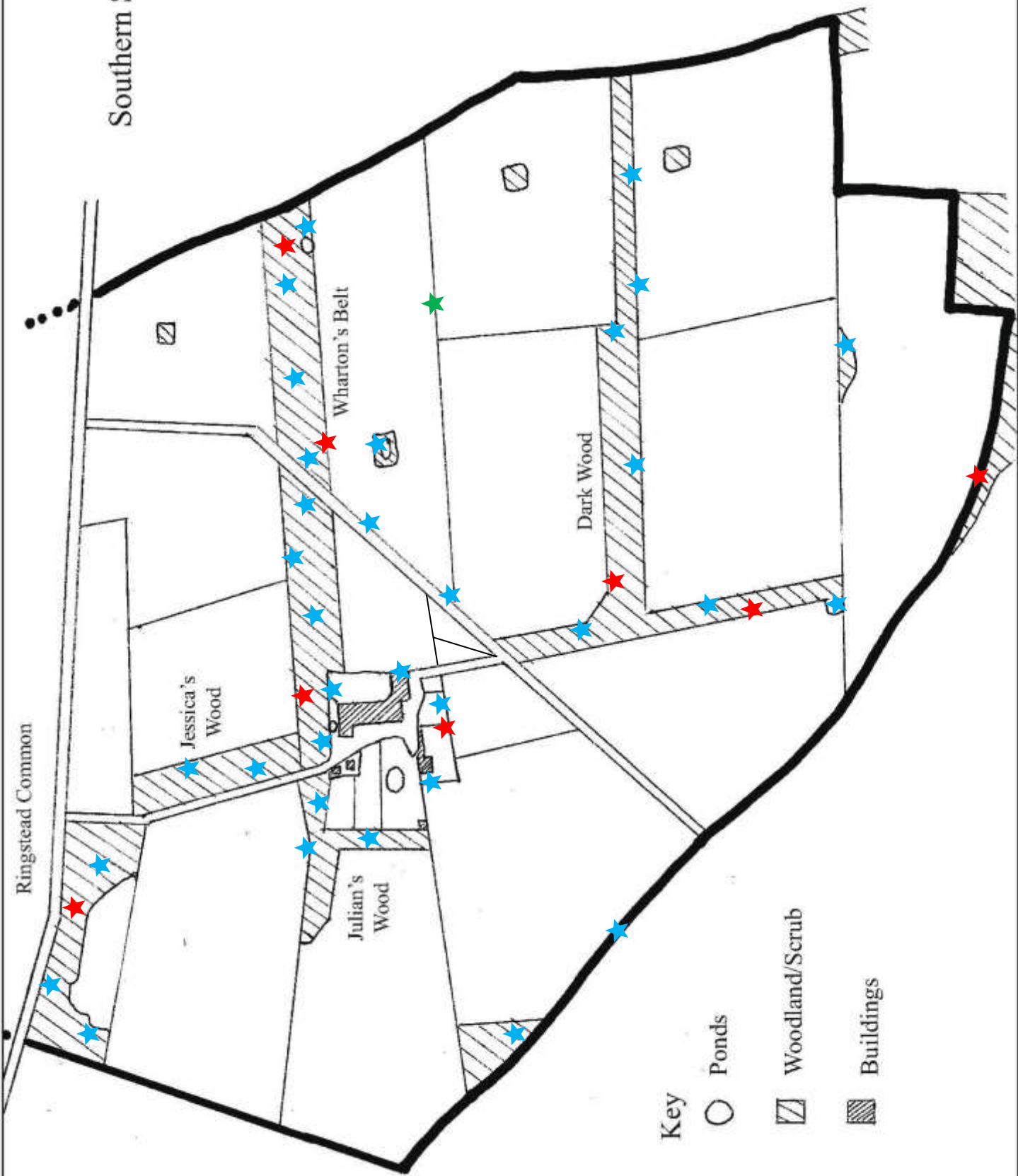
Northern Section

Ringstead Common

North Wood



Southern Section



Key

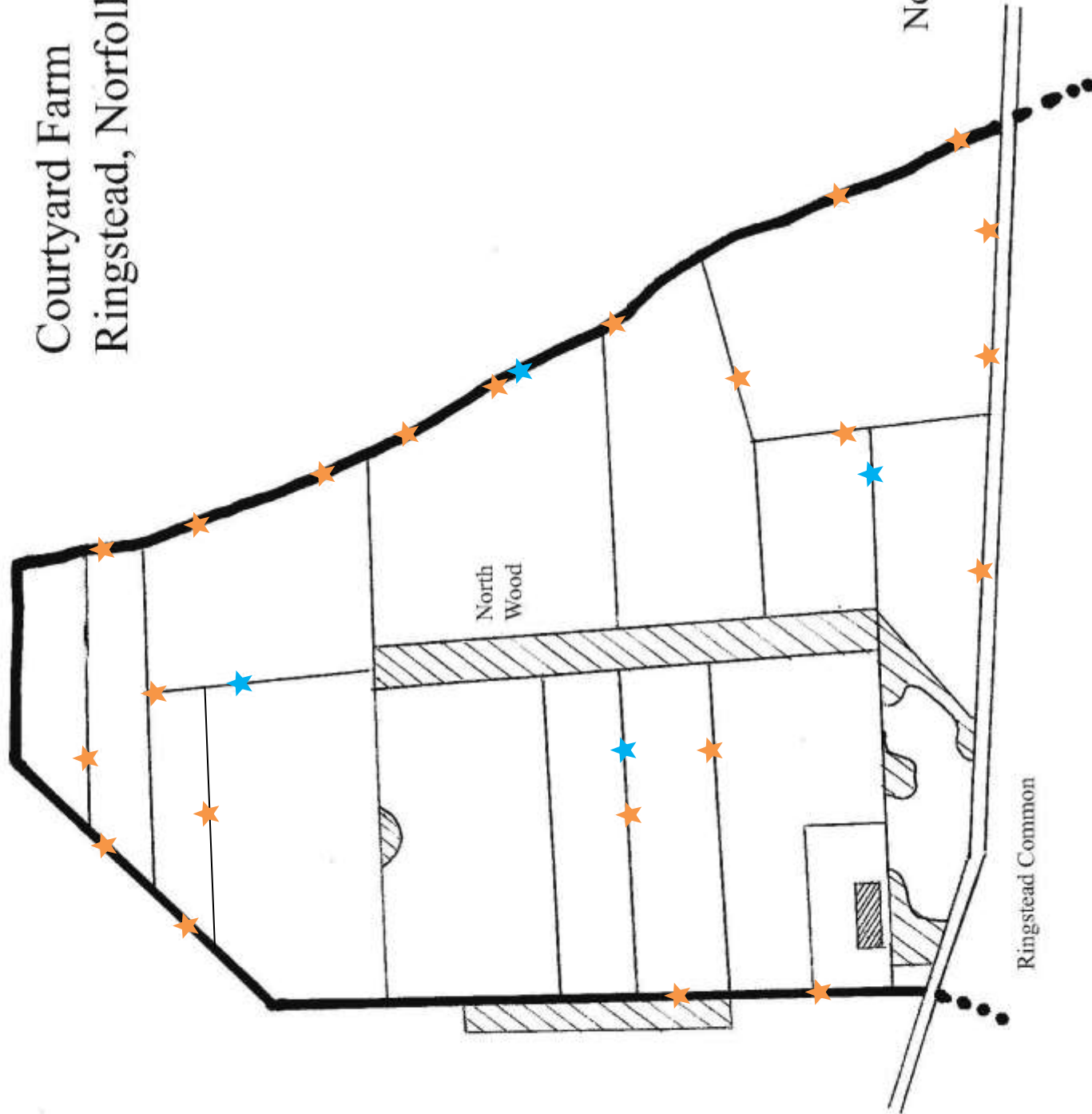
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

■ Buildings

# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

★	Lesser Whitethroat
★	Whitethroat

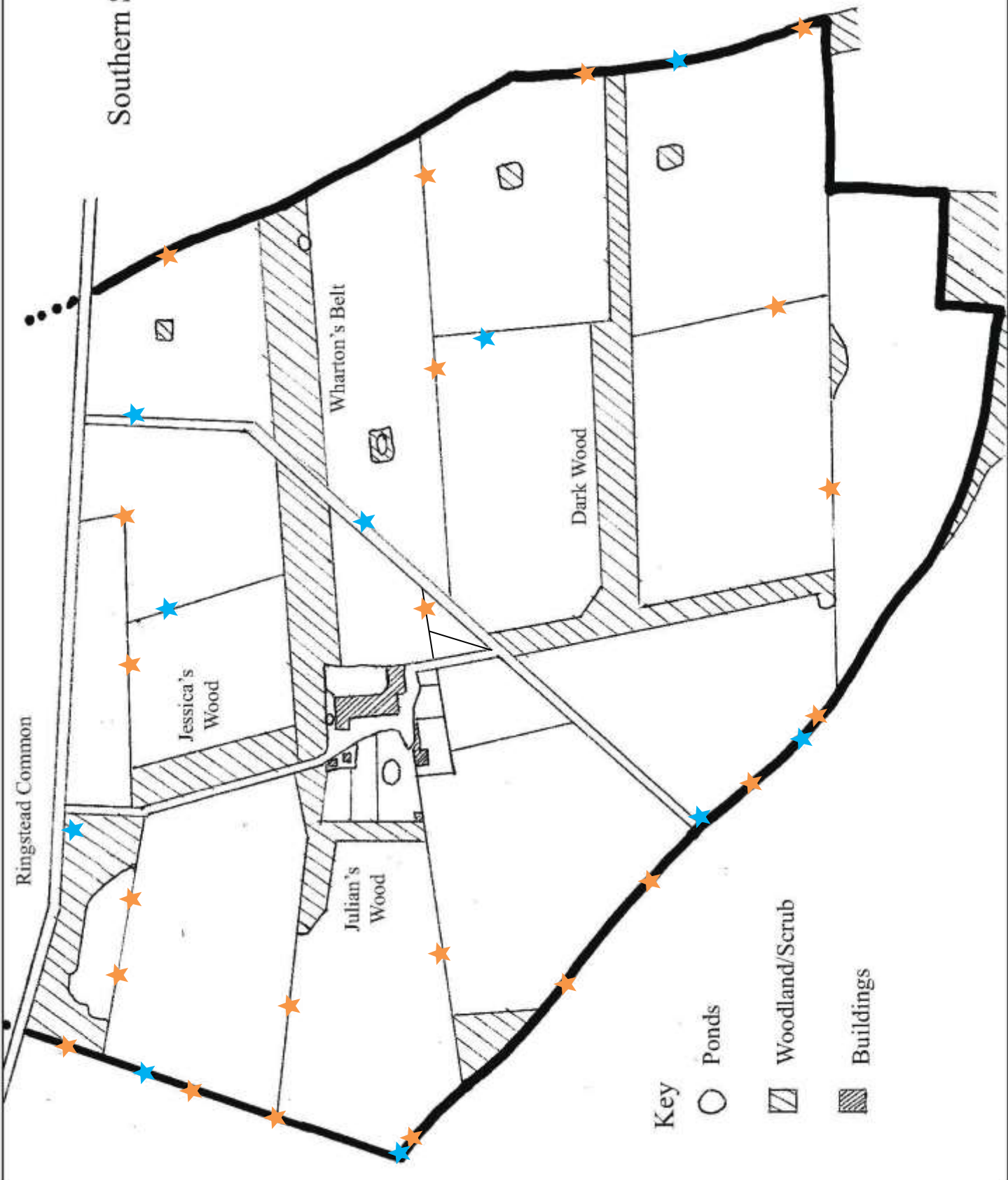


Northern Section

Ringstead Common

North  
Wood

# Southern Section



Ringstead Common

Jessica's Wood

Julian's Wood

Wharton's Belt

Darkic Wood

Key

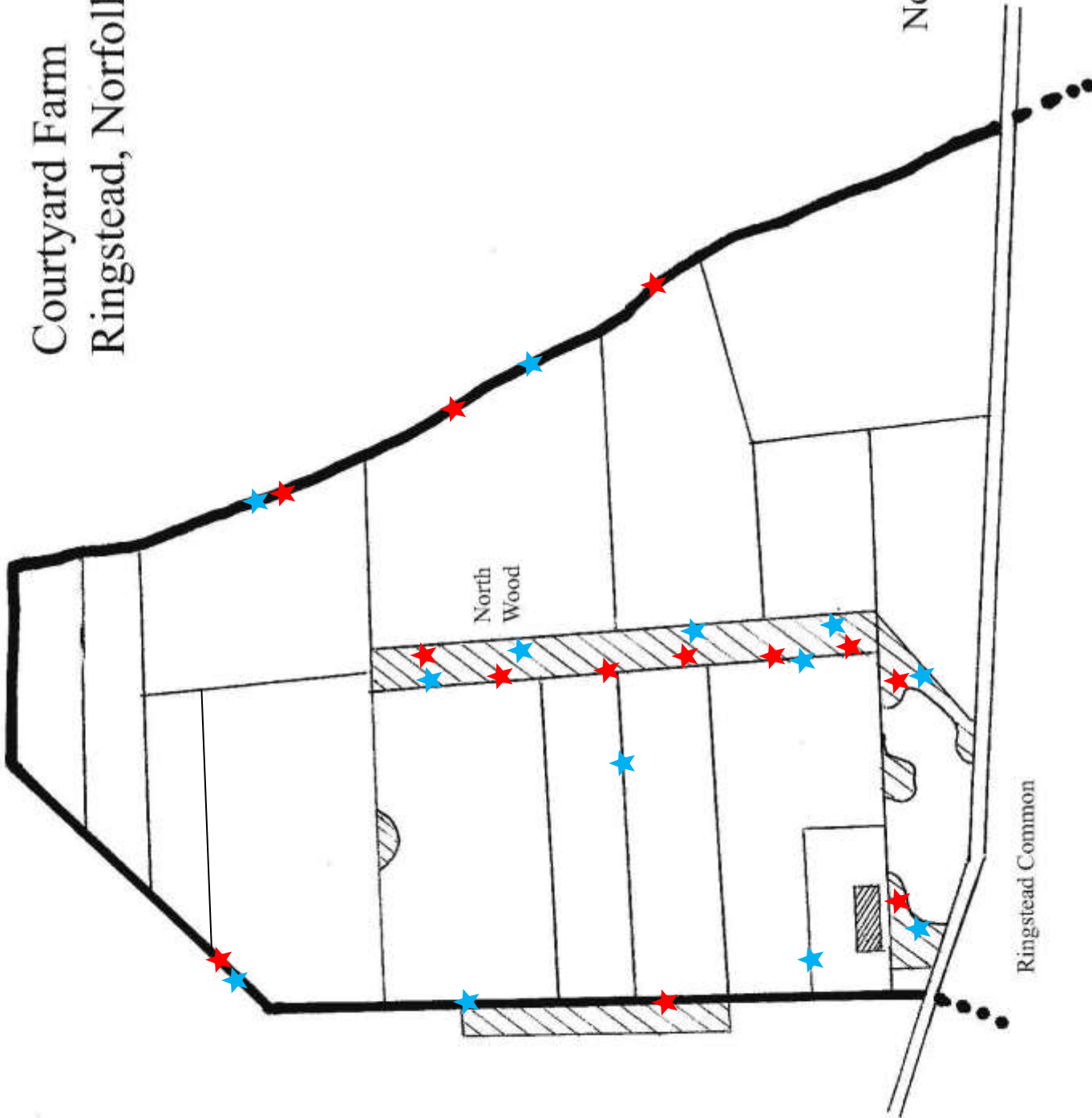
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

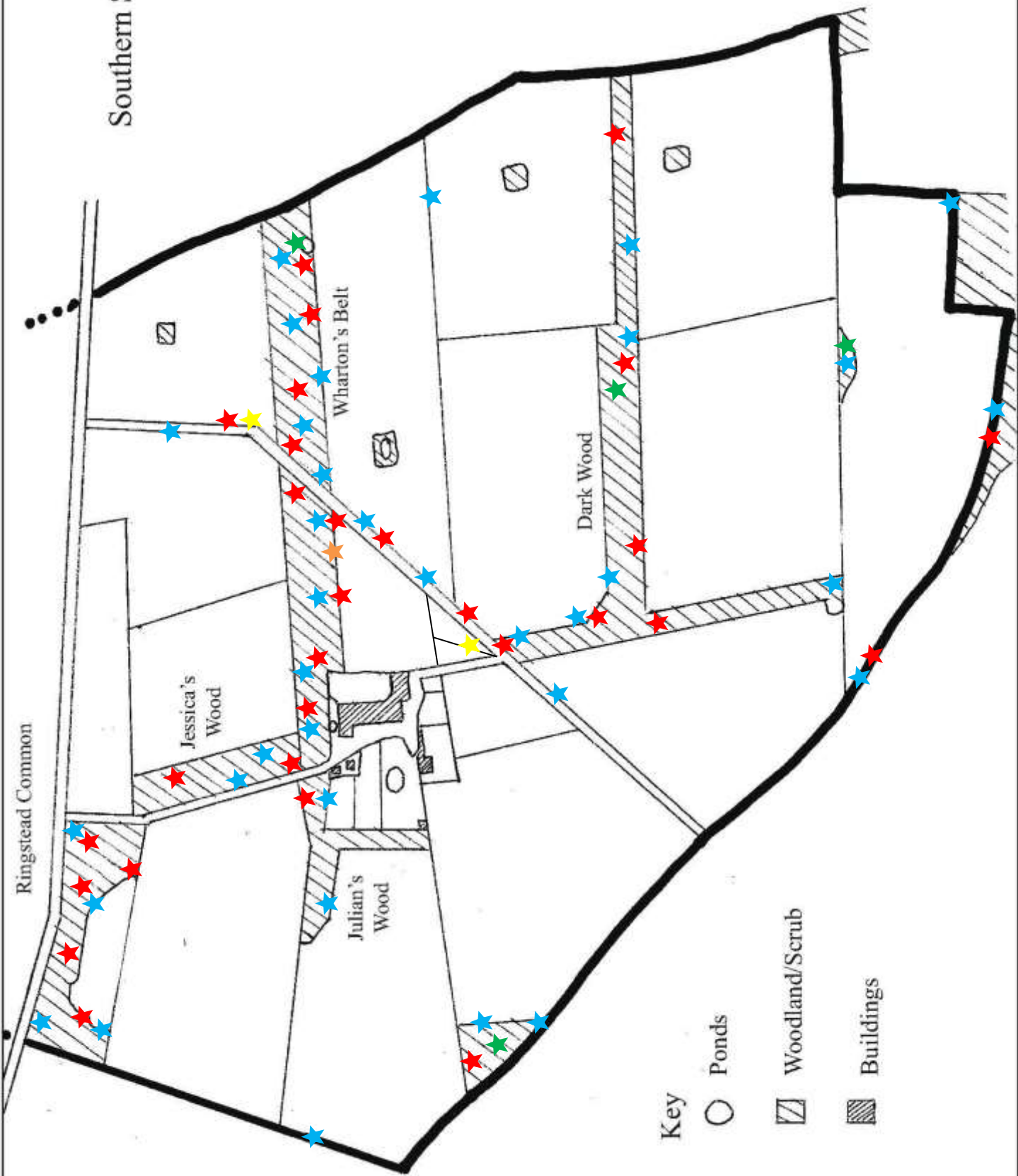
■ Buildings

# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

- ★ Chiffchaff
- ★ Willow Warbler
- ★ Blackcap
- ★ Garden Warbler
- ★ Goldcrest



Southern Section



Ringstead Common

Jessica's Wood

Julian's Wood

Wharton's Belt

Dark Wood

Key

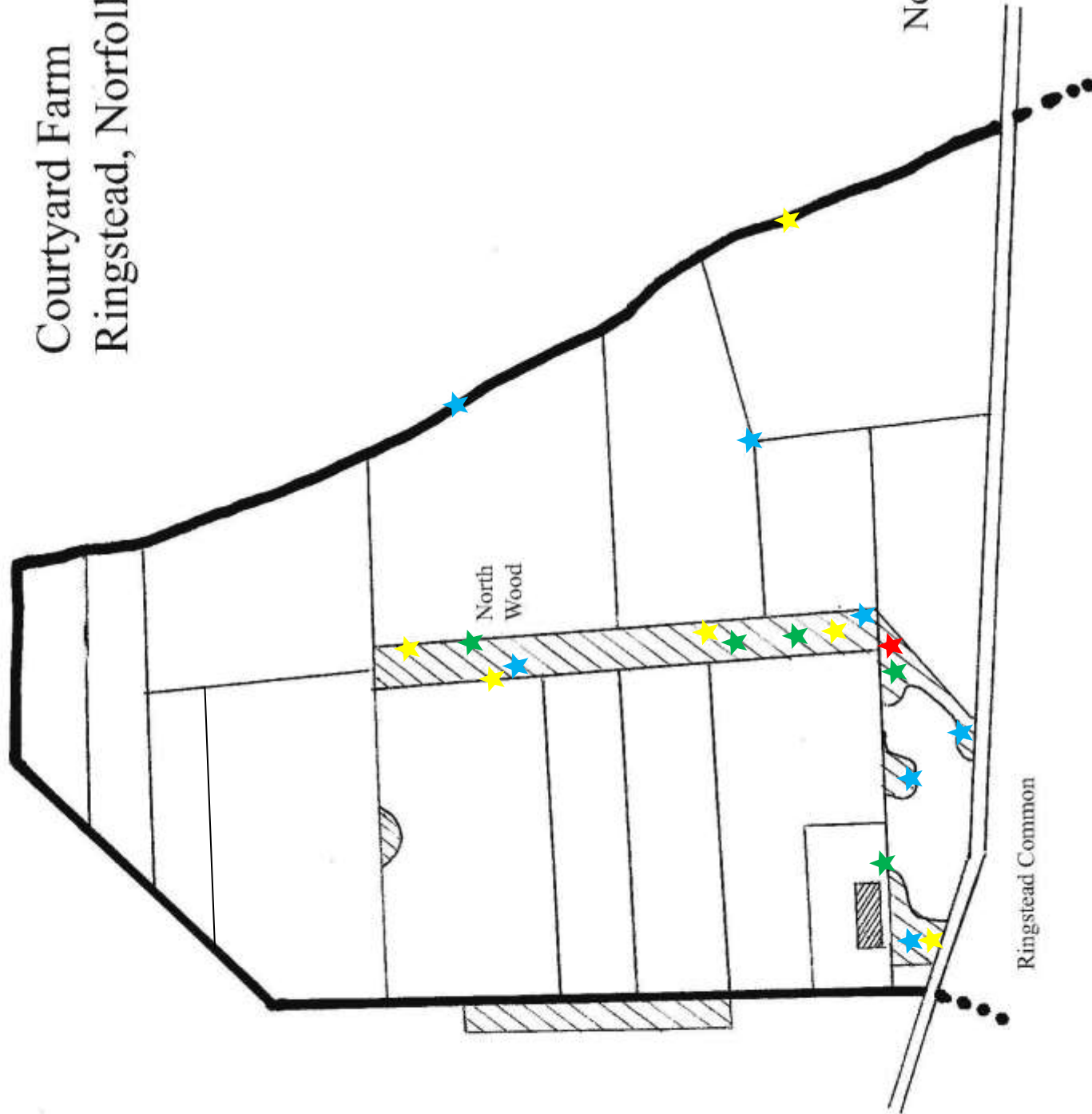
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

■ Buildings

# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

- Coal Tit
- Long-tailed Tit
- Blue Tit
- Great Tit

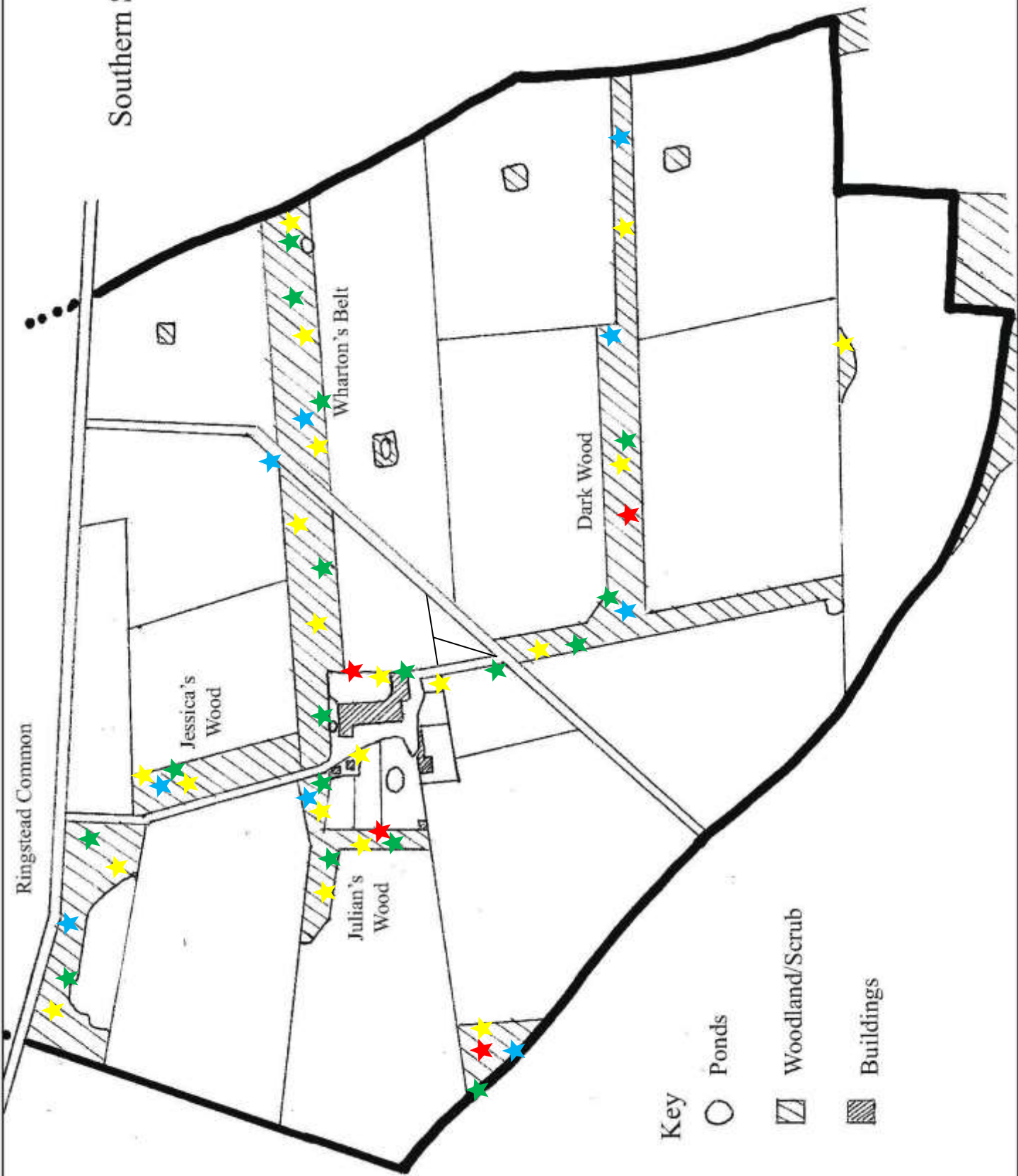


Northern Section

Ringstead Common

North Wood

Southern Section



Ringstead Common

Jessica's Wood

Julian's Wood

Wharton's Belt

Dark Wood

Key

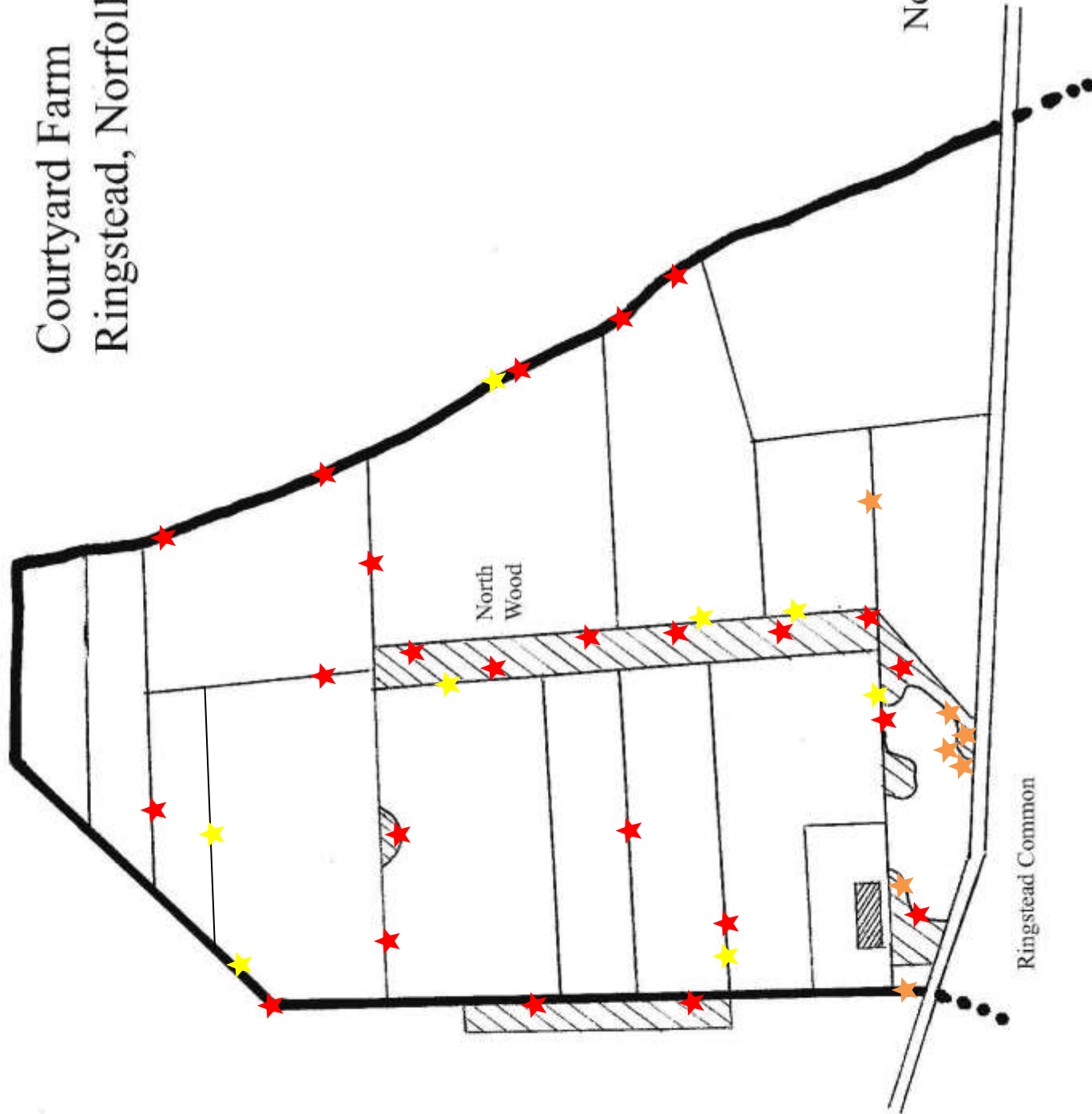
○ Ponds

▨ Woodland/Scrub

▩ Buildings

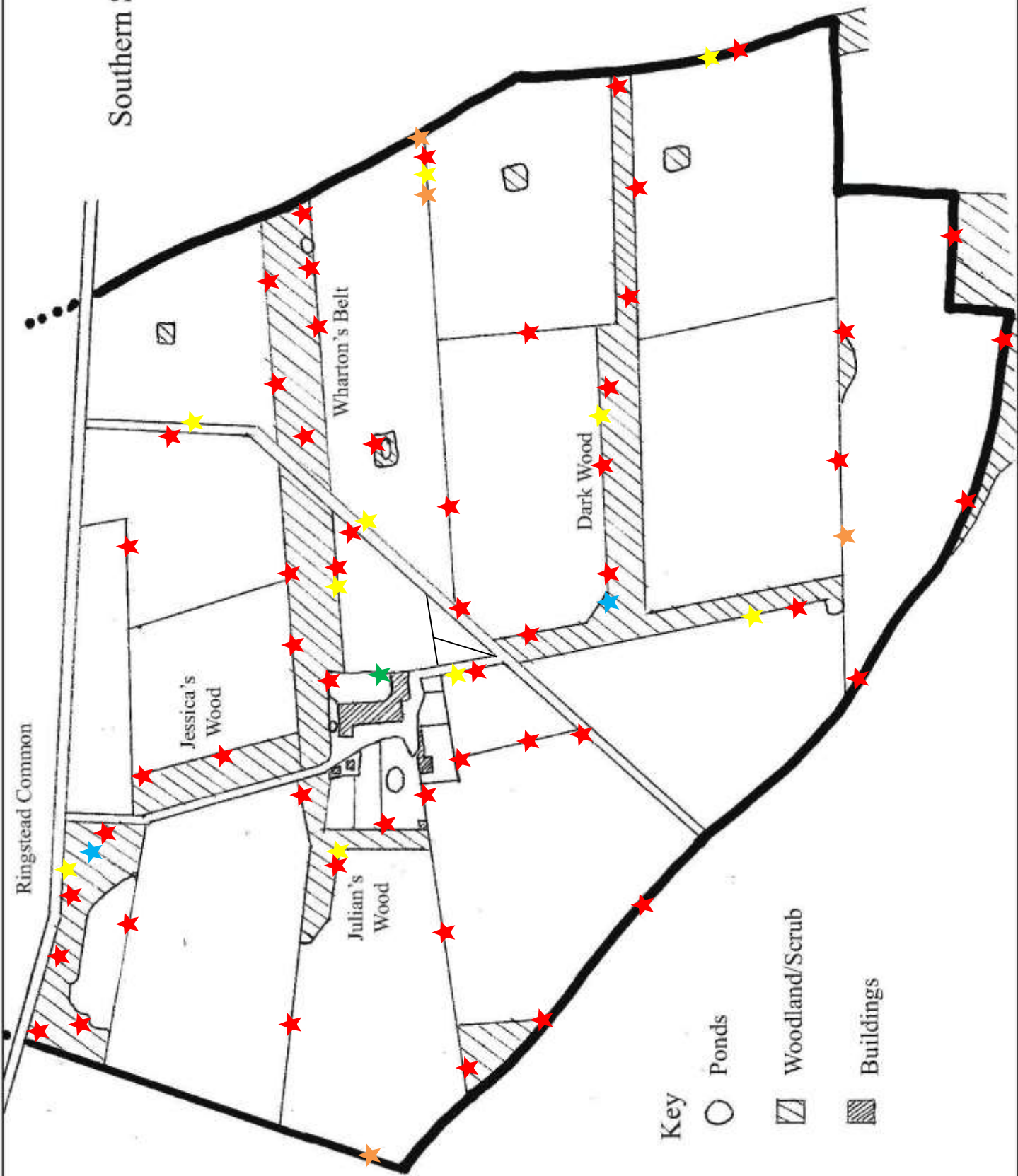
# Courtyard Farm Ringstead, Norfolk

- ★ Chaffinch
- ★ Bullfinch
- ★ Goldfinch
- ★ Greenfinch
- ★ Linnet





Southern Section



Key

- Ponds
- ▨ Woodland/Scrub
- Buildings

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