

Birds on Ashdown Forest

January/February

With winter in full swing the Ashdown Forest is a very cold place indeed. Many of our over-wintering species are at their peak numbers in January including Redwing, Fieldfare and Meadow Pipit.

Because of the short days birds spend much more time feeding and it can seem as if there are no birds at all. But dawn and dusk are the best times to catch what's about as birds are coming from or going to their roost site.

An hour or two before dusk is a very good time to look out for birds of prey on the forest. Hen Harriers, Short-eared Owls, Merlin, Peregrine Falcons, Kestrels and Sparrowhawks all like to hunt before looking for a suitable roost site. Harriers, Owls and Falcons are rare on the forest but winter is a very good time to look for them. With the exception of Peregrines they all like to hunt over grassland or heather. Hen Harriers in particular like to roost in heather.

Ravens, presumably juvenile birds, also get seen more frequently around the forest in the winter time. It is not known exactly where they come from or are going to.

Although more noticeable in the summertime Woodcock are still present and are often flushed by people, dogs or livestock moving through the underbrush.

More Finches and Buntings are also present on the forest at this time with flocks of Siskin, Redpoll, Brambling, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting and the increasingly hard to find Crossbill. Look around deciduous trees like beech and oak for Brambling feeding on the autumn fall of seeds. Siskin and Redpoll like alder trees but can also be seen in pine, larch and silver birch. Crossbills prefer pine but will also feed on larch. Yellowhammers and Reed Buntings feed on finished flower heads including heather.

Another finch which gets overlooked is Bullfinch. Nothing quite beats going out on a cold winter's day, after a light dusting of snow, and seeing a male Bullfinch sitting up in a bush with his beautiful plump red breast contrasting against the whiteness of the background. Bullfinches are so overlooked in fact that the Sussex Ornithological Society (SOS) are asking for absolutely any records of Bullfinch. So if you do see one please send in your record!

As we move into February the winter species begin to think about going back north, although the majority don't start to go until the beginning of March. But February is a time when some species are thinking about breeding on the forest! Yes, both Woodlark and Crossbill have young in this month. Woodlark have some very strange habits: in the late autumn they all disappear (presumably heading for the coast) and then re-materialise in February to breed; they then have several broods through the year.

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