

Birds on Ashdown Forest

November/December

Winter time on Ashdown Forest is usually a very cold affair, as being where it is, any icy wind blows straight through. But this isn't a weather report!

Some, including myself a long time ago, think that in the winter the Forest is a bleak and empty wilderness and that looking for any birds is a waste of time. Well it's just not true as there are still plenty of things to see. You've just got to brave the elements.

Many of our resident species are very active in these months; Robins, Blackbirds, Song and Mistle Thrushes are feeding on the abundant berries on Holly, Yew, Hawthorn and of course any left over blackberries. Joining them at the beginning of November are the first migrant Redwings and Fieldfares whose numbers will swell during the winter months.

Flocks of finches including Redpoll, Siskin, Brambling, Chaffinch and Greenfinch can be found feeding on the autumn fall of seeds and nuts from Oak, Beech and Sweet Chestnut trees. A great place to look is Millbrook East, which borders Pippingford Park and has many deciduous trees including Larch.

The reason I mention Larch is that although Larch is a fir tree, it is actually deciduous, which makes it easier to spot an unusual and hard-to-find bird - the Crossbill – so named because the ends of its bill cross over each other – which feeds on Larch. Throughout the winter do look out for Crossbill flocks.

Out on the heathland, if you brave the weather, you could get several species of birds of prey. Hen Harriers are known to frequent parts of the Forest and also Merlin, Peregrine Falcon and Short-eared Owl have been recorded passing through.

The best time to look for birds of prey is either at dawn or about an hour before dusk. Find yourself a sheltered spot to stand and survey the heathland. Keep your eyes peeled for birds leaving the roost or flocking to roost such as Meadow Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Redpoll, Fieldfare, Redwing and occasionally Skylark, Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer. Woodcock are still present and occasionally get flushed out into the open.

Stonechats and Dartford Warblers are still present and can show really well on a very crisp, bright and sunny winter's morning. Other species around include Long-tailed Tit, Marsh Tit, Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Nuthatch and Treecreeper. Jays can be very active, collecting nuts and seeds for their winter larder.

A speciality of lowland heathland in the winter is the Great Grey Shrike. These birds come from deepest Scandinavia to Siberia and often over-winter on our heathland. You won't see a flock but occasionally they do turn up and one has already been seen this year.

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