

Birds on Ashdown Forest September/October

These two months are the best time to see passing migrant species – birds which have come here in the spring to breed, or go much further north and are migrating back through Britain (for a number of reasons). Autumn migration is always an interesting time but equally frustrating as the birds aren't singing, rarely call and sometimes prefer to hide away.

By the end of August Tree Pipit and the mysterious Nightjar have already finished and probably migrated. But there are plenty of species to look out for including Common Redstart, Turtle Dove, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Cuckoo and Hobby. Many are migrant birds, but some are the offspring of those that stayed for the summer.

Other migrants including Ring Ouzel, Whinchat, Wheatear, Yellow Wagtail, Pied Flycatcher and Lesser Whitethroat use the forest as a staging post as they head down from the north to feed up before moving to coastal locations (like Beachy Head for instance) to make the jump to the Continent.

You have to be very lucky to actually get to see any of these species! Migration normally starts at dawn and by 9am the majority of birds have moved through or have hidden themselves away again. Some are easier to see; Common Redstart, Turtle Dove, Hobby and some warblers often feed out in the open.

Wheatear and Yellow Wagtail like open grassland, as short as possible (bordering on bare ground) and even better if there are cattle present. They feed on insects in the grass and animal dung.

Whinchat like heather and can often be seen sitting up on a vantage point looking for insects, but don't forget that Stonechats do too! The easiest way to identify a Whinchat is to look for its eye-stripe.

Unlike the Stonechat, a Whinchat has a large creamy white eye-stripe and has a much paler (and possibly more peachy in colour) breast.

Other species get into feeding flocks, most notably; Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, and Long-tailed Tit. If you see a flock moving through you are most likely seeing females and juveniles as the males usually continue to hold their territories. Often other small birds get into these often large and noisy flocks including Goldcrest, Treecreeper, Nuthatch and many warbler species, so watch the flock carefully as you never know what might be in there!

At the end of September the last Swallows and House Martins are making their way south. By now nearly all of the warblers have moved through; though there is always the possibility of a migrant Firecrest, these little birds are very hard to find.

Some of our resident species start to sing again in October including Robin, Wren, Dunnock and Song Thrush. And Dartford Warblers are more active during these two months as well.

By mid-to-end October migration is pretty much over, with possibly the odd late Swallow, House Martin or Wheatear. At the end of October our resident species have woken up from their summer slumber and winter species should be moving north...

Peter Johnson