



LATE SUMMER 2020 REPORT ON BIRDLIFE OF ASHDOWN FOREST WEST & NORTH CHASES

By the third week of July both birdsong and bird activity had reduced noticeably on the heaths and woodland edges of both chases. All the birds were still here but were often skulking in the gorse, bracken and birch and willow scrub, safe from avian predators.

WHITETHROATS (summer visiting warblers from the Sahel region of Africa) could be found in family parties resting briefly on the tops of lush bracken as they moved into nearby gorse in search of insects and scolding any walker who came too close.



Whitethroat in Bracken by Clive Poole



Whitethroat in Bracken by Clive Poole

STONECHATS (so much at home on Ashdown's gorsy heaths) were also less prominent at this point in the season, the families with juveniles starting to hunt more safely at the bases of gorse bushes but still giving out their "stone-bashing" contact calls.

Also, less noticeable were **REDSTARTS**, a close relative of the Stonechat and the Robin but unlike those two resident birds a species which only visits Ashdown Forest for the spring and summer.



Redstart on wire fence by Clive Poole

The males have long since stopped singing from the tops of prominent trees and their "hoeet-tik" call is what will reveal their presence in either undergrowth, birches, Scots pines or oaks. A fearlessly naive juvenile **REDSTART** called from willows beside a track before perching in full view on a fence wire looking down for insect prey while it called out giving time for a photo call.



CROSSBILLS, SISKINS AND REDPOLLS (all members of the finch family) have all “bucked the trend” and have continued to call and to make song-flights. Try to learn their respective calls, and if possible, their songs. Then if you pause around a Scots pine copse or listen for them overhead with their bull-necks you may have spotted a Crossbill. Siskins and Redpolls could also be heard making a din around Scots Pines and birch woods at this time.

A highlight of late summer is a bird of prey which favours wooded heathland near farmland. This is the **HOBBY**, a few pairs of which arrived in May on the Forest from tropical Africa and should stay until late September. In silent flight they look very streamlined with pointed elongated wings recalling huge Swifts. At the start of their sojourn here they have been feeding, bizarrely, on large insects but have switched their diet to House Martins and Barn Swallows now that their rapacious young Hobbies have fledged. Hobbies by instinct time their breeding to coincide with the fledging of Martins and Swallows!



Hobby on Scots Pine by Clive Poole

Not by coincidence, this summer I have noticed, during my lockdown walks, regularly, small flocks of **HOUSE MARTINS**, (smaller relatives of Barn Swallows) looking very dapper in navy and white plumage as they speed about over the wetter heaths of the central West Chase, twittering noisily as they feed on insects above the few ponds and pools here.





Common House Martin

BARN SWALLOWS, though present over the heaths have been less prominent. One brood locally has definitely been predated by crows - but the parents' first brood was fledged successfully!



Barn Swallow by Clive Poole

Warm evenings after sunset have been a delight on both Chases. Not only have the sunsets been breathtakingly beautiful but they have heralded the start of the strange and evocative churring of male **NIGHTJARS**.



Nightjar resting



Nightjar resting

These nocturnal visitors from tropical Africa have had the heaths to themselves as darkness has fallen. They have been heard giving their far-carrying squeak as the males sally forth from the branches of oaks and pines where they have been resting during the day. On several occasions, to the accompaniment of hooting Tawny Owls and barking of buck Fallow Deer, we have watched as these kestrel-sized birds hunted low over the heather to catch the moths and large flying insects which sustain them.



Dartford Warbler by Clive Poole

Clive Poole.

Voluntary Ranger.

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