



BIRDLIFE ON ASHDOWN FOREST DURING JANUARY & FEBRUARY



Dawn Moon over Isle of Thorns by Clive Poole

Sunrise and sunset walks in January, especially in good moonlight, on the edge of mature woodland, have often been accompanied by the reassuring hooting of TAWNY OWLS, defending their territories from rivals and alerting mates of their departure or return to their roost tree.

For the “larks” among us, walking around sunrise is particularly productive for locating **LINNETS**, a small finch which roosts in the safety of dense gorse thickets on the Forest. They “rocket” out of the gorse in twittering flight soon after dawn, often in small groups, and head off to feed elsewhere on farmland stubble. The males are now beginning to sing prior to spring breeding.



Linnet by Clive Poole



Female Crossbill

CROSSBILLS, another finch, can also be noticeable on Ashdown at this time of year. The best way to locate them is to listen for their distinctive loud “chup, chup” calls. These birds have been present here throughout 2020 and into 2021. They will only stay on the Forest for as long as the pine seed harvest lasts, after which they will move on in search of ripe pinecones, often many miles away or even back to the Continent. With their strong necks and crossed- over mandibles, they are adapted to prise open the cones of pines and then extract the seed with their tongues. They can either be right-crossed over or left-crossed-over! Males are orange and females greenish-yellow. Juveniles are streaked. Breeding Crossbills in East Sussex are restricted to Ashdown where there are ample Scots Pine copses & woods. They will breed in small numbers at any time of year but especially in winter or early spring.



Not so fussy about food are **RAVENS**, which have made a welcome return to the Forest after many decades of absence due to human persecution. They are attracted to undisturbed areas of woodland abutting heath where they will search for carrion, such as deer carcasses. Soon pairs will be repairing their nests and commencing breeding; like Crossbills, they are a bird which starts breeding preparations well before Spring is really here!



Raven by Clive Poole



Female Stonechat by Clive Poole

Whilst most of our **STONECHATS** have by now abandoned the Forest for slightly warmer wintering conditions on the south coast, or even across the Channel, a few pairs linger on over winter. They may be noticed dropping down from a gorse thicket onto a stony or grassy path if they spot a small moving insect. These few have gambled on surviving a mild winter to be the first of their species to claim a prime breeding territory and gain a head start this coming spring. Will their gamble pay off?

Now that the hours of daylight are beginning to increase, the first bird to return to from its wintering grounds on the South coast, or the nearby Continent, is the plucky, barrel-chested **WOODLARK** - which *never* lives in woods so don't go looking there!!! These birds are rare in the UK with around 3000 pairs mainly in southern England. Look for them from late January onwards, on open areas of Ashdown where there is short grass, short, mown heather or mangled gorse litter. Here they feed on the ground and reveal themselves almost when you are close to treading on them, flying a short distance emitting a musical "tluee" call. Males will be in beautiful song-flight over open areas by February. My favourite songster on the Forest!!



Woodlark by Clive Poole