



REPORT ON BIRDS & MAMMALS ON ASHDOWN FOREST WINTER 2020

A welcome record in early November was a COMMON SNIPE (related to Woodcock and Curlew), paradoxically now a very uncommon wading bird in inland Sussex, but a regular winter visitor in small numbers at a boggy habitat on the West Chase.

Several **STONECHATS** could still be found in November in areas of heather or moor grass with gorse bushes. One male posing on top of a gorse bush, long enough for a photo opportunity. They will nearly all have left the Forest by now to winter on the milder south coast or possibly across the Channel.



Stonechat by Clive Poole

Soon after sunset or soon after sunrise in November on the West Chase have been good times to keep eyes “peeled” for ROE DEER. They are smaller than Fallow deer and not closely related. Native to Britain they do not form herds, but feed singly or in groups of two or three and have been seen this November mainly on the margins between woodland and heath. If you see a deer looking curiously at you before moving off and sporting a cream behind with no black markings, you have spotted a Roe (“Ra” in Old English). The bucks have short spiky antlers pointing upward.



Roe deer at the Forest Centre



Another surprise in mid-November was to find a PIPISTELLE BAT one unseasonably mild evening hunting insects close to a house on the West Chase.

Flocks of **COMMON CROSSBILLS** have been a noticeable feature on the Forest this year and November and early December have been no exception. They can be watched flying from copse to copse of mature Scots Pines wherever these occur on Ashdown. They are seeking out mature pinecones in which are the pine nuts on which they depend. I have invariably found the easiest way to find these elusive and uncommon birds is to listen for their distinctive loud “chip chip” call as they fly overhead singly or in small groups. If you have brought binoculars with you then well worth the trouble once these noisy birds have landed to check them out since in good light the male shows orange-red and the female yellow green.



Crossbill

During these months, most birds on the Forest fall silent, preserving energy to keep alive and avoid drawing the attention of predators. However, if you pause beside a thicket of gorse you may be lucky enough to hear the harsh “terr” or “derr” call of a resident **DARTFORD WARBLER**.



Dartford Warbler by Clive Poole



You can only be certain if the bird “pops up” out of the gorse to show its extremely long tail relative to its tiny body, looking dark in winter light. They rely on looking for spiders in the gorse to keep them alive here until warmer weather comes to the heath. Wrens and Dunnocks also call and sing here so make yourself familiar with their voices to compare them with our “Furze Wren” (old country name for Dartfords).

The **LINNET** is still common roosting in gorse thickets on Ashdown but leaves each day at sunrise in twittering little groups to feed elsewhere on farmland and return at sunset.



Linnet by Clive Poole

It is worth scanning the sky as you walk on open heath areas in case the Crow that passes overhead is something much rarer. Again, the call will give you certainty: listen to Carrion Crow calls. Then if you hear an unfamiliar very loud and deep “honk, honk” (I think of a pig in flight !) and see a buzzard-sized black bird flying slowly high above, with a very long wedge-shaped tail and a very long neck and shaggy throat and huge beak-then hey presto - **RAVEN**.



Raven

They have returned in recent years in small numbers to Ashdown, feeding on carrion, especially carcasses of dead deer. During November, walking on the South Chase a pair of Ravens were flying down the line of a valley calling deeply and engaging in a mock dogfight.



Another very large black bird, which seemed quite incongruous flying over the open heath of the West Chase in November was a **CORMORANT**, its wings set far back.



Cormorant by Clive Poole

CLIVE POOLE, Voluntary Ranger, Ashdown Forest - 02/12/2020