



SECOND HALF OF MAY BIRDLIFE ON THE FOREST DURING COVID-19 PARTIAL LOCKDOWN

The second half of May 2020 on the West and North Chases has lived up to expectations. May is always the best month here for bird activity since most of the migrants from Africa have now arrived for their breeding season and may has been warm and dry.

Get out onto the Forest without delay. Male **Cuckoos** which arrived from the Congo and Angola in April are frequently "calling"(what we treat as their call is actually their song) from woodland edges to defend their territories from rival males and to attract females. Most males will have left by June, having mated, and will start the long journey back to tropical Africa. Cuckoos have now been heard on all four Chases this May.

The first male **Nightjar** arrived on the West Chase in early May from southern Africa and staked its territory in mixed woodland with dead bracken understorey. Male Nightjars on both West and North Chases have been heard "churring"(a strange mechanical sound likened to a carpenter's electric drill) after sunset on warm evenings. They feed on moths and large low-flying insects over heathland. **Tawny Owls** and **Cuckoos** (briefly) have accompanied them for a sunset chorus! A strange crepuscular bird, the **Woodcock** has added to the excitement of dusk on the Forest, the male making his rapid tree-top flight called "roding".



Woodlark



Woodlark

In early morning look on the ground in areas where the Conservators' countryside workers have machine-mowed the old, tall, straggly gorse and left behind gorse litter and bare earth. If you spot a movement it may be a rare **Woodlark** (the German name translated "Heathlark" is more apt) foraging for seeds in the debris. It will fly only a short distance if disturbed, maybe onto the top of a nearby tree and emit its fluty call.

Male **Skylarks** are still in full song ascending to the heavens in a joyful cascade of song to raise our spirits during lockdown. They mostly favour large expanses of heath with grasses or heather and bare earth.

You will notice small numbers of "little brown Jobs"(apart from the dog poo!) especially feeding on the sandy tracks and perched on gorse. These are **Linnets** and commonly nest and roost in dense gorse on all the Chases.



There are a few pairs of **Dartford Warblers** populating all Chases of the Forest year-round, skulking, and feeding in gorse. If you see a tiny bird with a **very long tail** “pop” up on top of gorse you may have had a very lucky sighting!



Dartford Warbler



Dartford Warbler

They are far outnumbered in summer by their larger and near relative the **Common Whitethroat**. The males having arrived in late April from the Sahel in Africa, take possession of any area of gorse with birch saplings to proclaim their territories sometimes with testosterone-filled crazy song-flights.



Willow Warbler



Chiffchaff

Two other summer visitors, **Willow Warblers** and **Chiffchaffs** have continued to entertain us with their singing. They look superficially indistinguishable, but if you learn, via an app., their completely different songs (like chalk & cheese) you will have achieved a milestone.

Clive Poole, Voluntary Ranger
Ashdown Forest. 21.05.2020