

# New Forest Fact File

## WILDLIFE AND CONSERVATION

### Birdlife of The New Forest

The New Forest heaths, valley mires and Ancient Woodlands are the most important in Western Europe and support important populations of both rare and common bird species. As such, a number of national and international statutory designations formally recognise the importance of these habitats.

In 1993, The New Forest was designated a Special Protection Area under the EC Wild Birds Directive (1979) 1993, for the conservation of the honey buzzard, Montagu's harrier, kingfisher, woodlark and Dartford warbler. The directive applies to birds, their eggs, nests and habitats. Additionally in 1993, the New Forest was designated as a Wetland of International Importance, under the Ramsar Convention 1993.

#### **Ancient and Ornamental Forests**

The ancient grazed woodlands of the Forest are renowned for their wealth of dead wood habitat and very old trees, so all three woodpecker species are found here. The Forest also supports a large percentage of Hampshire's summer visiting wood warblers, a small ground nesting leaf warbler that prefers dense canopied woodland with little or no ground cover. These old woods are also home to good numbers of redstarts, spotted flycatchers and some hawfinches, along with other common woodland birds such as jackdaws, stock doves, tits and starlings where these cavity nesting species have good supplies of potential nest sites.

During the winter large numbers of redwings and fieldfares come to the Forest to feed in the extensive holly areas and bramblings can be found in the old woods.

#### **Heathland**

The Dartford warbler is the bird most commonly thought of in context to the New Forest and management of the open heath is closely linked to the requirements of this little bird. Mature dry heath and gorse provides optimum habitat and a 1994 survey showed a population of around 540 pairs, the highest on record.

The Dartford warbler shares its mature heathland home with summer visiting nightjars and resident stonechats and meadow pipits, the latter being the commonest bird encountered on a heathland walk.

Areas of shorter regenerating heath are often home to skylarks and around woodland edges the rarer woodlark inhabits areas of heavily grazed grasses and heather. Woodlarks declined heavily throughout the country from the 1950s but have shown a steady increase in the Forest over the last six years with a 1997 survey total of around 170 pairs, possibly the second largest population in the country.

The vast valley mire systems of the Forest are inhabited by snipe, curlew, lapwing and a few redshank but the latter three species are very prone to disturbance by recreational users and have not fared well in recent years.

A recent success, however, has been the return in 1995 of a pair of Montagu's harrier to breed in the north of the Forest after an absence of thirty years. Not to be confused with our wintering hen harriers, the Montagu's is a very rare summer visitor to Britain and because of its habit of ground nesting is very vulnerable to casual disturbance. A 24 hour watch by FC staff and volunteers assists the birds in their breeding attempts.

Most winters a few great grey shrikes from Eastern Europe and merlins and hen harriers from Northern England can be seen in the Forest preying on small birds such as meadow pipits and Dartford warblers. Late on a winter's afternoon the lucky observer may see three or four large impressive hen harriers flying together before dropping in to roost in long heather.

### **Inclosures**

The enclosed areas of the Forest are where commercial timber growing is practised and forms both a deciduous and coniferous mixture of varying age structures.

Although not rich in variety of bird species they do hold good populations of siskins and in some years crossbills. Common Buzzard and sparrowhawk nest throughout the Forest favouring the coniferous stands of timber and FC Keepers are kept busy locating these so as disturbance is avoided during routine forestry operations. Hobbys can often be seen hunting for large moths over the heathland but breed in old crows' nests around the woodland edge. A lucky or dedicated watcher may glimpse the rare honey buzzard as it searches for wasp nests to dig out.

Goldcrests are often abundant and the much rarer firecrest can be found by the experienced birdwatcher with a good ear for its distinctive song.

From majestic 120 year old Fir trees to 250 year old Oaks and Beeches, from streamside lawn to heather clad valleys, the diversity of the New Forest can yield ornithological riches to those who have the time to explore it.



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