

## New Forest Notes – May 1992

### **The Forest's threatened birds**

As a non-ornithologist, I have never been able to raise much enthusiasm for such insignificant avian morsels as the Dartford Warbler, although I would certainly not deny its place in the mosaic of wildlife and scenery which comprises the New Forest. Larks, curlews and nightjars are an entirely different matter. Their calls are, for me, an integral part of the Forest's character. The first spring day on which I hear the curlew calling over the Forest's bogs is always memorable. It was therefore a great sadness to me to hear the predictions of an ornithologist friend that within the next ten to fifteen years we may see the last of many ground-nesting birds in the New Forest. He has charted the retreat of such birds on the heaths around his home as they are driven back from one nesting area after another. He now believes that the end is in sight, although it must be said that the figures in Colin Tubbs "New Forest" do not demonstrate such a decline up to 1985. His forecast, however, is not the wild statement of some animal rights fanatic, but the gloomy result of patient observation over several decades.

Ground-nesting birds face all sorts of pressures including natural predators, management policies affecting their breeding habitats and disturbance by human beings, but it is dogs which, in the absence of controls, will bring about their ultimate disappearance. Hundreds of dogs are turned loose daily from the car parks of the Forest, to rampage across the heath driving everything before them. Those car parks that serve dense residential areas on the Forest's margin produce the most intense pressure. It is certainly not unusual to see four or five dogs disgorged from one car in my part of the Forest, and dogs hunting up to a quarter of a mile from their owners are common. To take only one example, I suspect that a careful study would show Deadman Bottom near Bramshaw Telegraph hunted over by dogs every thirty minutes or so during an average dry Sunday. In the face of such a relentless onslaught, it is no wonder if ground-nesting birds find it hard to raise young and eventually choose to abandon the Forest.

I suppose that the eventual loss of such birds must be accepted as an inevitable consequence of public recreation and that those of us who will regret the silence of the heaths fifteen years hence are in a small minority. I do, however find it surprising that resistance to such impending losses has been so muted. I would have expected some campaigns, however doomed to failure, by those organisations dedicated to the protection of birds. Perhaps they have assessed the certain violence of public reaction against any dog control and decided that the loss of ground-nesting birds in the New Forest is a price which has to be paid for public support elsewhere.

Of course birds are not the only victims. Observe the deer at any peak recreation time and you will find them constantly on the move, driven on by people and dogs with no chance to settle. Even more ready targets are the Commoners' animals. Stories of foals dragged down by dogs, are common every year, while pigs, sheep and even cattle have all been subjected to horrible mutilations from the same cause. Almost invariably the culprits go undetected and unpunished.

### **Litter and Vandalism**

One of the jobs which the Forestry Commission does particularly well is the organisation of litter clearances, originally called Operation Cleansweep and now known New Forest Pride Week. Voluntary groups and individuals are invited to join in a mass clean-up of debris left behind by visitors during the preceding months. It is a disgusting job and all those who take part are owed a great but too often unacknowledged debt by the rest of the Forest. While, it is undoubtedly true that day visitors are responsible for the worst of the Forest's litter, there is one class of rubbish which is very much home grown and which for that reason is completely unforgivable. Visit some of the sites where timber felling has been taking place and you will see what I mean. Stuffed into ditches or piles of branches you will find the detritus of modern timber production. It comprises the metal and plastic containers of chain lubricant for saws, two-stroke oil cans, hydraulics fluid drums and diesel cans. This is by no means a recent development. As long ago as 1970 the Hampshire Field Club and New Forest Association complained to the Forestry Commission of such dumping and periodic reminders since have failed to produce any improvement.

After being irritated by a particular bright yellow can disfiguring a beautiful piece of oak woodland for three years, I eventually removed it myself during March. In this case the drum contained the very unpleasant and quite possibly dangerous residue of fungicide which the Commission uses to treat conifer stumps. It would be nice to think that this dumping is carried out by outside contractors and not the Commission's own staff, but that does not alter the ultimate responsibility for the mess. It is difficult to criticise the visitor for leaving cans and bottles while this situation can occur. In the matter of litter and vandalism, the Forestry Commission is quite as much sinned against as sinning. In the last few weeks there occurred one of the nastiest pieces of vandalism I have seen in the Forest in recent years. The Commission had taken great pains to replant an area of storm damage in Pitts Wood with young oaks. Each was provided with a plastic tube (to encourage rapid establishment) and a hardwood stake. Many hundreds of, such trees had been planted and the job was nearing completion when the vandals struck. At least twenty-five trees, were broken off with the tubes smashed and the stakes uprooted. Spread throughout the devastated area was a mass of litter. Now this is not a roadside picnic site which might expect to receive such treatment; it is deep in a remote part of the Forest and it is inconceivable that casual vandals should have discovered such a site for their activities. Those who did it were almost certainly sent there,

probably as part of one of the organised hikes, by youth groups which are commonly encountered off the beaten track and whose passage is not difficult to follow because of the drinks can trail. I know that there are highly responsible, clean and well-mannered groups which use the Forest, but it is surely time to review the number of organised parties sent unsupervised into vulnerable areas. Fortunately the Commission was quick to repair the damage and clean up the mess in this case.

### **Controlled Burning**

This year's controlled burning programme has been something of a disaster, with well below the target area achieved. Deliberate burning of the heaths is undertaken by the Forestry Commission every year (usually in March) to improve the quality of the grazing. This is achieved by removing the accumulated dead material which clogs the ground and allowing an early growth of fresh green shoots of molinia grass. It also serves to rejuvenate the gorse bushes, provided they are not too old, while the singed gorse itself provides a valuable feed for the ponies.

In recent years the programme has fallen further and further behind due to a combination of poor weather, inadequate resources and, most importantly, severe conservation restrictions on the size of area to be burnt. Years ago it was quite common for fifty acres or more to be burnt in one block. Today, burns are often little more than a quarter of that size. Clearly such small blocks are quite uneconomic in terms of manpower and preparation, including the cutting of the obligatory "traces" around the site to be burnt. Unless something can be done to improve on recent performance, there is a danger of a return to the type of arson which was common early this century, and which was wholly stopped by the official programme. In addition, as the Commoners rightly point out, the terrible summer fires which do such damage to all Forest interests are likely to become regular events if the combustible material is not periodically removed by spring burning.

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