



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

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Gorse burn © Roger Stace BBOWT

Slash, Burn or Nurture?

Too much scrub can compromise the diversity of wildlife on our nature reserves, but it's a question of balance. Scrub provides valuable shelter for birds and insects but too much of it can be a bad thing, so staff and volunteers spend much of the winter removing it from our nature reserves. Scrub comprises shrubs such as hawthorn, blackthorn, dogwood, gorse and bramble, together with young trees of prolific seed producers like birch and willow. Left untouched this scrub would rapidly spread.

Lowland heath, chalk grassland and many other valued habitats are plagioclimaxes (a habitat where the

influences of humans have prevented the ecosystem from developing further) where this succession has been halted by actions such as grazing, cutting or burning. Open habitats of the past would have been maintained by grazing animals and local commoners living off the land, cutting birch, gorse and other woody vegetation for shelter, fuel and their livestock. Many wild species came to rely on the open spaces created by this way of life and much of our work today replicates these actions for the benefit of wildlife.

Taking heathland as an example, too much scrub negatively impacts the specialist wildlife that thrives there – birds like woodlark or butterflies such as the silver-studded blue that rely on open habitat. If scrub was left unchecked then the heathland

would be lost, replaced by silver birch woodland.

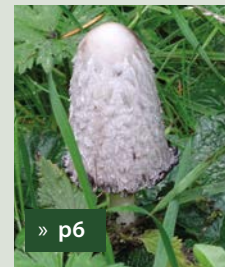
'Scrub bashing', as it is often called, is our typical method of scrub control, where volunteers armed with bowsaws and loppers cut down the scrub. If we don't want it to grow back we will paint a dab of herbicide onto the stump to kill the roots. Bonfires burn some of what is cut, while piles are left to decompose, providing perfect habitat for invertebrates and reptiles. It is common practice to leave a few patches of scrub and the occasional tree to grow on to improve diversity and structure. All scrub clearance is carried out between September and February so as to minimise disturbing wildlife, particularly nesting birds and reptiles.

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West Berkshire Countryside Society

Caring for our Countryside – Join Us and Help Make a Difference.

West Berkshire Countryside Society

The aim of the West Berkshire Countryside Society is to promote the understanding, appreciation and conservation of the West Berkshire countryside... furthering these objectives through practical conservation work and guided walks and talks from local experts. It was formed in 2012 by amalgamating the Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys; the Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group; the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers & the Barn Owl Group.

Upstream is our quarterly publication designed to highlight conservation matters in West Berkshire and beyond and to publicise the activities of the Society.

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Volunteers' Task Diary

For outdoor events please wear suitable footwear and clothing. Most practical tasks start at 10am and usually finish around 3pm, unless otherwise stated, so bring a packed lunch. However, we are more than happy to accept any time you can spare! All tools are provided. A map of each task location can be found on the website diary page by clicking on the grid reference shown for that task.

Date/ Time	Venue	Details
January 2020		
Tue 07 Jan 10.00	Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead	Scrub clearance on this parish wildlife site. Access the common via the track which leaves the B4494 west at Cotswold Farm SU440 777. Please leave your vehicles at the bottom of the track and walk up to the common. Vehicles carrying tools and refreshments please drive directly to the task site.
Sun 12 Jan 10.30-13:00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner SU550 688.
Tue 14 Jan 10.00	Basildon Primary School	Woodland classroom maintenance. Park along Ashampstead Road SU592 763.
Tue 21 Jan 10.00	Holt Lodge Farm, Kintbury	Coppicing to refresh the hazel stools and open up the woodland canopy. Parking at Holt Lodge Farm House near Kintbury SU387 648.
Tue 28 Jan 10.00	Redhill Wood	Ride widening and brash clearance. Parking SU419 642 off road, park on entrance to the main ride.
February 2020		
Tue 4 Feb 10.00	Stanford Dingley	River bank clearance. Clearing selected trees and scrub along the riverbank of the Pang to allow light into the bed of the river. Park on the Byway which runs South from Bucklebury Road in Stanford Dingley opposite the entrance to Pangfield Farm SU566 716.
Sat 8 Feb 10.30-13:00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner SU550 688.
Tue 11 Feb 10.00	Sulham Water Meadows	Coppicing bankside trees by the stream. Parking at Sulham Church SU644 742.
Tue 18 Feb 10.00	The Malt House, West Woodhay	Hedge maintenance of hedges laid in previous years. Please remember to bring your own lunch with you on this task, our hosts at the Malt House now supply lunch for us during our March visit but not for other occasions. Park at Malt House farmhouse SU395 637.
Tue 25 Feb 10.00	Sheepdrove Organic Farm, Lambourne	Hedge laying. Parking at the red barn SU349 816. Do NOT use sat nav for this site.
March 2020		
Tue 3 Mar 10.00	Furze Hill, Hermitage	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Parking at new village hall - through double gates off Pinewood Crescent SU511 739.
Sun 8 Mar 10.30-13.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner SU550 688.
Tue 10 Mar 10.00	Hillgreen Leckhampstead	Scrub clearance, park at SU452 767.
Tue 17 Mar 10.00	The Malt House, West Woodhay	Hedge laying on the site we have worked on for several years. If you wish to enjoy the delicious lunch provided by The Malt House SU395 637, then please confirm your attendance to tonyjmcdonald@btinternet.com by the end of the day on Thursday 12th March.
Tue 24 Mar 10.00	Stanford Dingley	River bank clearance. Clearing selected trees and scrub along the river bank of the Pang to allow light into the bed of the river. Park on the Byway which runs South from Bucklebury Road in Stanford Dingley opposite the entrance to Pangfield Farm SU566 716.
Tue 31 Mar 10.00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield	Woodland management and ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield. SU584 723.



Conservation Volunteers Round Up

Rain was an unwelcome feature of many recent tasks but failed to dampen volunteers' enthusiasm and efforts.

A series of downpours at **Winterbourne Wood** meant that we were continuously donning waterproofs and then stripping them off to avoid overheating! Nevertheless, we coppiced hazel stools and protected them with wattle fencing from some of the cut material, with the rest being stacked to await future disposal. We sawed up a very large tree that had fallen across a neighbour's fence and into her field, then protected the damaged fence to prevent sheep straying. On an earlier visit, we cut and raked grass to encourage butterflies, with our brushcutters creating easy, trip-free access to the pond.

A dire weather forecast of heavy rain for our final task at the **Organic Research Centre in Hamstead Marshall** did not deter seven resolute volunteers who cleared paths and cut the Donkey Field to encourage next year's wild flowers. Despite short, nasty showers, everyone worked hard – and longer than usual – to complete the work. We have always enjoyed our visits over the years and our excellent working relationship with the owners.

At the **Malt House, West Woodhay**, we coppiced hazel and collected posts and binders for hedge-laying during the winter. Tools were taken to the site by tractor and trailer; the volunteers walked. We protected the new coppice stools from deer with wire fencing and brash. Just as we were finishing, it

started to rain heavily and everyone got wet walking back to the cars.

At **Cleeve Water Meadow** we removed hanging timber and other branches along the Thames towpath and Cleeve Court boundaries. Chippings from a felled oak were wheelbarrowed to resurface a path and weeds cleared from several areas where they threatened to smother plants such as Loddon Lilies. We also raked previously mown grass and burned a significant amount despite its very damp condition.

At least it was one of the year's warmer days at **Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead** where we cut back a great deal of vegetation along the full length of the right-of-way, as well as opening up two alternative routes for walkers. We also "haloed" around staked trees.

On one visit to **Rushall Manor Farm** we felled trees on the edge of a ride; a second visit saw us trimming bramble five metres back from footpaths and tackling mature and unwelcome rhododendron. Previous efforts have led to a marked increase in biodiversity, with more bats and 109 species of moths being reported. Our efforts have also made the woods more pleasant for visitors as allowing more sunlight to enter makes the paths drier and encourages wild flowers to grow on their margins.

We made our first visit to **Redhill Wood, near Hamstead Marshall**,

which covers 29 hectares and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) with mixed deciduous and coniferous trees. We cleared and tidied brash alongside a ride. The brash was very entangled, with larger branches up to 15cm in diameter, and difficult to move. We used chainsaws to cut it into sections which were neatly stacked at the edge of the wood.

After a long absence, we returned to **Padworth Common** to clear scrub. Fortunately, after yet more rain the ground was not as wet as predicted and our firemaster soon had a good blaze going that consumed much of the birch, pine and gorse. Scrub cut further from the fire was piled around a second fire-site ready for future disposal. Similar work – including clearing a 150m bund – was carried out on **Bucklebury Common** to augment the efforts of our weekend team.

Terry Crawford

Thank You!

I would like to say a huge thank you on behalf of all the land owners and myself who benefit from the fantastic team of the West Berks Countryside Volunteers, they cheerfully give their time and energy to help maintain and beautify our land for us, always cheerful whatever the weather. We really appreciate what you all do.

Mary Baylis, Winterbourne

Continued from page 1.

To clear scrub on a large scale there is always the option of chainsaws or brushcutters and tractor-mounted flails or mulchers. They do a speedy job but come at a greater cost and with an increased risk of disturbance. Large machinery would not be appropriate on the small heathland reserve of Decoy Heath, where a population of rare adders exists. Here we deliberately leave areas of scrub for summer cover and hibernation below ground in winter. Large machinery could have dire consequences.

Gorse is an important component of the wide heathland expanse of Greenham and Crookham Commons but in places it dominates to the detriment of other wildlife, especially ground flora on the acid grassland. For the past five years BBOWT has carried out extensive cutting of gorse to reduce its extent. But there is a balance to be struck between opening up heathland and grassland for

species such as woodlark and ensuring enough dense gorse cover for birds like Dartford warbler and stonechat.

Much of this gorse removal is achieved through mechanical cutting and mulching, but earlier this year we trialled burning stands of gorse for the first time. The burning was focussed on tall over-mature gorse, which has less wildlife value. Some of it will re-grow into thicker stands that support a great diversity of wildlife. Burning is far more cost-effective, though there are obvious risks associated with starting fires on a nature reserve! To minimise the hazard all burning was carried out by trained staff working with the local fire brigade. Burning like this does not contribute to climate change because the gorse absorbs as much carbon dioxide over its lifetime as it releases when burnt.

Scrub removal is an efficient way to maintain habitat but scrub will always



Dartford Warbler ©Richard Steel BBOWT

grow back from roots or seeds so it isn't long before we're back out on the task. By managing the level of scrub on our nature reserves BBOWT continues to ensure a diversity of habitat and structure for wildlife.

Roger Stace and Simon Barnett
Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust
(BBOWT) Land Managers

109 Species of Moth!

Rides in our 100 acres of mainly ancient woodlands have been significantly widened over several years by WBCS Volunteers on their regular visits to Rushall Manor Farm. The theory is that ride widening greatly increases the amount of light reaching the ground, creating more and larger areas which experience both full & varying degrees of partial sunlight. The resulting variety

of habitats should increase biodiversity & population sizes of flora & fauna. But, has it worked in practice?

A rich carpet of grasses and wildflowers including the tasty Wood Spurge, have grown to replace the coppice hazel, ash and silver birch removed by the volunteers. In early summer we had more sightings of the very rare Drap Looper moth (which feeds on Wood Spurge). Was this a sign our efforts are bearing fruit?

On July 4th Peter Cuss from Bradfield College undertook a moth survey in the woodlands above Rushall Manor. A good night's survey might be expected to record around 70 species. On this night, Peter recorded a quite remarkable 109 different species of moth – including 3 which were nationally scarce.

Why were there so many species that night in Bradfield? Moths love the rich

habitat that is an Oak tree, bracken, piles of rotting wood, open glades, field margins and wildflower meadows all of which is here on the menu. Moths play a vital role in our ecosystems, affecting many other types of wildlife. Adults and their caterpillars are food for a wide variety of wildlife, including other insects, spiders, frogs, toads, lizards, shrews, hedgehogs, bats and birds. They are widespread, live in so many different habitats, and are so sensitive to changes they are particularly useful as indicator species for the health of our environment – like the canary in the coalmine.

We hope that this amazing number of species was not just luck – rather the result of our woodland management and organically farming the surrounding land over the past 20 years?

John Bishop



Drap Looper moth

©Peter Cuss

Mapping the Oldest, Most Important Trees

Old trees may have lived for hundreds or even a thousand years – linking us to our history and culture, as well as having astonishing ecological value, supporting our wildlife. Helping to identify these trees means we can give them the care and protection they need. The Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory (ATI) lists more than 170,000 trees & is a trusted resource for conservationists, planners and developers.

Identifying and recording trees helps us give them the care and protection they need, as well as helping us to monitor and conserve them for the future. For example, recent changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), effectively, gives Ancient Trees the same protection as built heritage, stating development should be refused unless there are 'wholly exceptional' circumstances, such as large infrastructure projects.

You can help. If you see an old tree, to record it go to ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk. A quick 'how to record guide' is available when you access the 'add a tree' screen. In summary, you will need to give its: location, species & girth (an estimate is fine). As well, it would be really useful but not essential if you could provide the following information such as: does it have a fat trunk? Do its branches or trunk show signs of hollowing? Is there fungi growing on it? Does it have dead wood in the crown or on the floor? These are all classed as 'Ancient Characteristics'. If you can provide a photograph that would be a great help.

For example, record all Oaks with a girth greater than 4.5m. But consider recording if more than 3.5m if they have previously been managed as a pollard (multiple branches starting at around 2.5m from ground level). Or

even from 3m if displaying significant Ancient Characteristics. On a single straight trunk measure a tree's girth at a height of 1.5m above ground level. Make sure to avoid measuring around any burrs on the trunk as best as possible; essentially you are looking for the narrowest girth measurement that you can find at or around this height. Keep the tape measure level, avoid measuring at a diagonal.

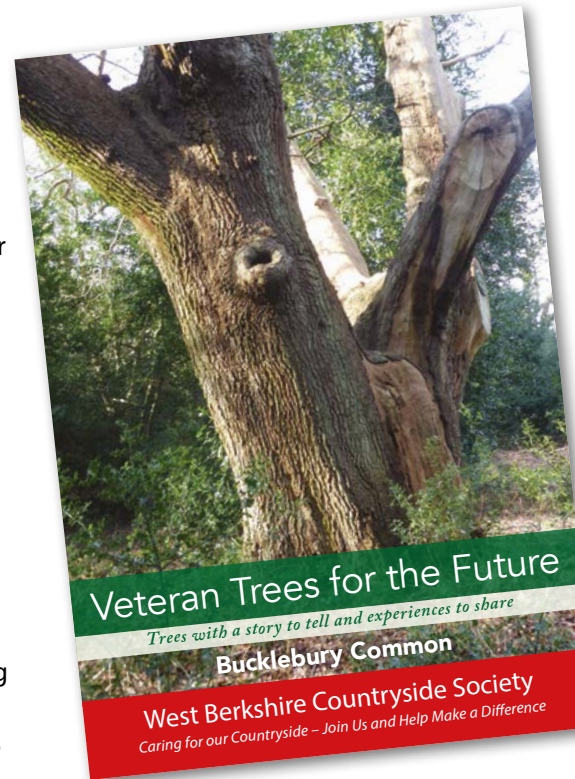
Your tree record will automatically be sent for checking and approval by one of our verifiers. Your record may take a little while to be verified. Newly-recorded unverified trees will not be visible on the website, so don't worry if your tree record is not showing immediately after you have logged it. The verifier may contact you about the tree, via the on-line message service. Your record will help identify ancient tree hot spots, track current threats and future losses

During our Volunteers last visit to Malt House farm, West Woodhay, James Cole kindly allowed me to record three trees. All English Oaks, the largest being 5.61 metres located in the field behind the house. Another one in the same field measures 4.91 metres. These have all been recorded as Veterans.

WBCS, in conjunction with the Woodland Trust, has recently produced a leaflet 'Veteran Trees for the Future', which covers this subject and highlights local Veteran trees in and around Bucklebury Common.

If it helps just tell me if you find one, tell your friends or other groups you may be associated with, spread the word... 'Stand up for trees. Look after them look after the planet'.

Terry Davis
Ancient Tree Verifier (Volunteer)



A Date for your Diary

A Walk Around Hermitage Parish.
16th February 2020 at 2.00pm

Starting and finishing in Everington Lane, Hermitage SU519737 where there is limited parking in lay-bys on either side of the road. Further parking can be found in the woods by the entry sign to the village, about 500m to the west.

We will see ancient landscape features including parish boundary tracks and banks, woodland, trees and pollards, quarries, water meadows, interesting farm buildings and a rebuilt Norman church.

The walk is about 4.5 miles long and contains a few steep hills. There are also a number of stiles on the walk. Surfaces can be muddy and uneven.

WBCS Walks Programme

Identifying Trees in Winter: 17th February

Around 12 walkers met at Ashampstead Common for a circular trail around the woods that have established both as a result of forestry planting of mixed native deciduous and coniferous trees and also as a collection of arboretum trees planted about 1-200 years ago. The soils are very acidic at the top of the hill (pH 3.5) overlying some alkaline chalk, which comes to the surface in places. It was noticeable that both these soils have an impact on the trees that do well; eg the Sweet Chestnut prefers the more acidic soil whilst Beech trees prefer the alkaline soils. Crops were not successful in the acid soils. The land has been used historically for grazing, as a deer park and, for the last 50 years or so, for forestry. There is much evidence of past land use; the C13th deer fence bank and ditch is still visible, clay quarries for road building, chalk quarries for liming the fields and fragments from the nearby kilns as evidence of an important pottery industry.

Throughout the walk we stopped to look at trees to make note of



Bishop's Pine

©Charles Gilchrist

any identifiable characteristics of trees such as: black buds on the Ash trees; fibrous, spongy bark on the Sequoiadendron; smooth bark on the Beech trees; and the carrot scent of the Hemlock conifer. We were also able to recognise the difference between a Scots pine and Bishop pine, from a considerable distance, by the colour of the bark of the Scots pine and the arrangement of cones of the Bishop pine

There were few flowers or birds at this time of year, but we did hear some ravens and see, close up, the male and female flowers of hazel.

Woodlands, Bluebells and Spring Flowers: 17th April

This popular walk starts at Hampstead Norreys Village Hall and goes up the wooded hill studded with historical landscape features and plant rich areas showing ancient woodland indicator species. Plants such as bluebells spread by seed slowly and therefore dense carpets of them is a sign that the woodland has been present for hundreds of years. Because of this it is possible to identify which parts of the wood have been increased from the original areas. The woodland also overlays, but does not completely hide, previous land use remains. In fact, the presence of the woodland preserves such features. We can still see boundary ditches that could predate the Domesday book as well as deer fences, terraces and lynchets. Other land use evidence exists in the remains of saw pits, chalk pits, potash pits for making lye and lime kilns. Other plants in the woodland include wood sorrel, wood anemones, townhall clocks, goldilocks, sanicle, dog's mercury, sweet woodruff and yellow archangel. I listed about 30 species of ground flora of which about half were in flower with the Bluebells. Dick Greenaway was



Early Bluebells

©Charles Gilchrist

present to talk about the landscape features.

Butterflies, Botany and Bog: 21st July

This year's event at Hampstead Norreys was a repeat of the walk in 2018 that was far too hot for comfort and in which the butterflies proved very skittish. This year, however, it was much more overcast and, although we did not see many butterflies, nature still provided plenty to observe to make the walk an interesting one. Grahame Hawker gave us the benefit of his knowledge of invertebrates and I talked about the plants we encountered. The route takes the form of two parts; firstly, the heathland track has a habitat comprised of bell and common heathers and cross-leaved heath together with gorse and silver birch. It is typical of very poor soil over a gravel hilltop. All the plants seem to be well suited to have survived two seasons of unusually dry conditions. One of the more commonly seen butterflies here was the gatekeeper which Grahame pointed out to us the visible difference between male and female being the brown markings on the wings of the male.



Sundew ©Charles Gilchrist

The second part of the common is a complete contrast; a very boggy and acidic soil reminiscent of highland peat hills or the New Forest. This day however, it was dry enough to walk on with ease and to see the bog asphodel, cotton grass (now over) and the sundew plants. The sundews are the highlight for me; being carnivorous they attract insects into the sticky liquid in the broad leaves which then enclose them using hairs spread around each leaf. The plant then digests the poor, trapped insect to make up for the nutrient-poor soil it has adapted to live in. The other interesting thing about the sundew is that the flower buds never open. We saw plenty of plants in bud, but they are capable of self-pollinating within the unopened flower bud thus saving precious energy opening petals.

Fungi, Fruits and Autumn Woods: 20th October

The Indian summer that usually begins on St. Luke's day (also known as St. Luke's

little summer) gave us an abundance of fruit and fungi to look at, and potentially harvest, on this pleasantly warm day. One of the largest groups of walkers came to Hermitage woods to see which significant features help identify half a dozen or so easily recognisable edible fungi and the features that warn of potentially poisonous fungi. The children present contributed much in scrabbling around for specimens both to identify and to harvest.

One of the first to be spotted was the Fly Agaric, a member of the deadly Amanitas genus. This is a typical toadstool of fairy tales and its red cap with white spots is visible from a distance. Someone spotted the emerging bud of a yellow form of the fly agaric, which is very unusual. The Amanitas genus typically has white gills and a swollen, bulb-like base. Although these features can be seen in some edible mushrooms it is an early warning sign to get your identification correct. The beauty of the Fly Agaric is that it enjoys the same growing conditions as the highly prized edible bolete and therefore acts as a marker. Boletus edulis (Penny bun, cep or Porcini) has a dry rounded cap, like a penny bun that Simple Simon would be familiar with, spongy white pores where other mushrooms would have gills and a thick stem reminiscent of a champagne cork.



Shaggy Ink Cap ©Anne Sayer

The stem is covered in brown net-like striations; when you see all these four identifying points you can be certain you have found a Cep.

Other fungi we saw included sulphur tuft, false death's cap, amethyst deceiver, plums and custard, parasol mushroom, birch polypore, stinkhorn fungus, butter cap, various coloured spindle or coral fungi, red cracked bolete, russulas and ink caps, to name just a few! The walk also looked at the difference between bracken and the male fern, the staggered fruiting of hollies and the abundance of chestnuts and acorns.

From a conservation point of view, picking mushrooms does not deplete the population any more than picking apples kills an apple tree. This is because the main part of the fungus is the mycelium (underground or within the timber) the bits we pick are merely the fruiting bodies; hence the reason we get both good years and bad years for fungi.

Although the walk was a relatively short one, the mud we had to wade through was heavy going and everyone was relieved to get back to the cars, having had an enjoyable afternoon.

Charles Gilchrist



Stag's Horn ©Anne Sayer

2019 - The Year of the Firecrest

The Firecrest is a tiny bird, 9 cm long & weighing 5-7 grams. It is similar to a Goldcrest, but is brighter and cleaner looking with a green back, white belly, bronze collar and a black-and-white eye stripe. A migrant from west central Europe, the Firecrest is a scarce, local, but increasing, British resident bird. Males return to their UK territories and start singing from late February. Most birds disperse from their breeding grounds and the bulk depart in early July. UK winter records are generally from heat pockets such as parks and gardens, especially at the coast, where the insectivorous diet is available.

In England breeding was first confirmed in 1962. The British Trust for Ornithology mentions a near-continual increase since then, recording an astounding 935% increase in the areas occupied from 2007-11. There has been a longstanding stronghold in the New Forest. Indeed 'The Hampshire Bird Atlas' mentions that 54% of the estimated UK population of 758 territories in 2011 were in Hampshire, of which 255 (34%) were in the New Forest.

In Berkshire breeding was first confirmed in 1972. Nearly 30 years later 43 singing males were found during an intensive survey in the east of the county during 2001. 'The Birds of Berkshire' Atlas Survey 2007-11 discovered Firecrests to be present in 39 tetrads (2x2km areas) and breeding was confirmed in 11 of them. The majority were again in east Berkshire but a few locations in the west of the county did record confirmed breeding birds.

My first encounter with the species was in Spain in 1979 then subsequently, in Majorca, Turkey, France, Poland, Corsica, Morocco and Italy. This continental experience of Firecrest stepped up a notch – the spectacular change in my observations began in March 2017. It started at Greenham Common with the presence of a singing male. The bird was quite

easy to find beside a main path and showed very well as it was early in the spring and the trees were still bare. A Goldcrest was also around and for the first time I was able to latch onto the songs side by side and really learn to distinguish them. The next development came on Newbury District Ornithological Club's outing in April to Selborne, home of Gilbert White, the famous 18th century ornithologist. At the time we were very surprised to find 6 singing males, but later learnt this was a known local hot spot. And then in early May at Exbury Gardens we heard at least 20 singing males, another hot spot it seemed. By now my ears were very well tuned in to the Firecrest song.

On May 21st 2017 during a routine morning run out on Bucklebury Common my excitement hit fever pitch. A male Firecrest was singing loudly right by the road. No doubt about it. After racing home to get binoculars and rushing back I was able to confirm a pair was on territory and see the first of two pairs which bred in 2017. This was a great experience of what was to be many more pairs of Firecrests breeding in my local patch.

Unfortunately, none were found by me during the 2018 breeding season in spite of lots of time spent searching their previous haunts.

By contrast, summer 2019 has been extraordinary. The first song was heard on March 5th and then through April, May and June it seemed as if these birds were everywhere that I went and listened or looked. All were in routine running distance from my house. A total of 13 territories were found in or around Bucklebury Common. Several birding friends came to listen, look and photograph with spectacular



Firecrest

©Debby Reynolds

success. The preferred habitat seems to be scattered oak trees with open understorey of holly and presence of ivy. In several cases Goldcrests were around too.

To round off the season, a single male Firecrest, giving snatches of song and calling loudly, was in the tit flock going through our garden on 10th September. There was quite a celebration to be had that evening!

In conclusion, whilst our pessimism about the loss of species is generally justified, there is just occasionally a bit of good news. Although it is only October it seems certain that 2019 will definitely be my 'Year of the Firecrest'. This species does seem to be increasing in our area and is now on the radar for a Berkshire county survey in 2020, the results of which will be very interesting. Further growth in the population and expansion of the range is anticipated.

Debby Reynolds



Don't forget our website!
www.westberkscountyside.org.uk