

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-January to mid-February 2025

Writing this on Valentine's Day, I'm reminded that most birds seem to be solitary or in flocks for much of the year, with pairing up restricted to a relatively short period in spring and early summer. But a few species buck this trend, and three spring to mind as birds that are so often seen in pairs. Collared doves, for example, seem to enjoy each other's company and are very lovey-dovey (and of course that expression comes from the apparently loving, attentive behaviour of dove pairs). Another example is the stonechat, which can so enliven a winter's walk through a rough meadow or open scrub; having chanced to see one bird perched atop a dead plant stem, from which it can survey the ground below for insects, it is usually a matter of only a minute or two's patience before its mate will pop into view on a nearby tall stalk. Neither of these species is regularly seen in Blean Woods, but the third bird on my list, the bullfinch, most certainly is a woodland resident, albeit a rather scarce one (on my 310 hectare monitored plot I usually only record about five pairs each year). Unlike the other two species, bullfinches are very retiring, though without actually being shy, and have minimal vocalisations (a thin, single-note piping call heard at any time of year, and a rather pathetic four-note "song") that are uttered very quietly and sparingly, so this is a species that is easily overlooked, despite the beautiful plum-coloured breast of the male, and the striking white rump that is clearly visible as the bird flies away from you. But, if you have been fortunate enough to see a bullfinch, or have been alerted to its presence by its weak call, it is almost invariably just a question of waiting a short while before its mate will appear nearby. Then they will sit in the same tree, quite possibly sharing the same branch until, at some invisible prompt, one bird takes off and the other follows suit, two white rump beacons disappearing silently into the depths of the woodland.

If you visit the wood now, you'll see that many of the open areas have been mown, including strips on either side of the wide rides and also glades, large and small, that are dotted around the wood. This is an annual task, carried out on a two- or three-year rotation, which serves two main purposes. One is to keep woody vegetation in check; in the absence of any major herbivores that would browse the saplings' foliage (even rabbits are fairly scarce in the wood), mowing does the not so dissimilar job of cutting tree saplings, mainly oak and birch, plus bramble. While not killing the plants, this management does at least force them to start growing all over again, so they never attain any great height, with the result that the clearings don't revert to scrub and then woodland. Secondly, keeping the woody vegetation at bay encourages the less vigorous herbaceous plants to survive, which means in turn that the myriad insects reliant on them for food and shelter have a better chance of survival, with the added bonus that the floristically richer glades and verges are also far more attractive to the reserve's visitors. Nature doesn't always oblige us, as we all know to our cost, and a case in point is the Orchid Glade, named after the common spotted orchid that once grew abundantly in that small clearing, but which is now in need of a new moniker, given the dramatic decline in numbers of this attractive pink and purple-lined orchid. I have written about this lovely gem of a glade before, and it is sad to see the orchid disappearing for no readily discernible reason. Is it simply some sort of cyclical process of boom and bust, or is there a deep-seated explanation for the decline? Orchids deservedly have a reputation for capriciousness, and there is no guarantee that even a detailed study of this species' behaviour would elucidate the mystery.

Michael Walter
michaelwalter434@gmail.com
01227 462491