

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-March to mid-April 2025

Regular breeding bird surveys began rather quietly in March, but one of the features of these early morning visits for the past few years has been overflights of pairs of grunting mandarin ducks. For such a strikingly plumaged bird (the male at any event), its call is remarkably dull and rather boring, but it does at least draw my attention to the birds, which would otherwise be all but invisible. Unlike the other duck species with which we are familiar in the south, mandarins nest in tree holes, and I have yet to track down any, but would dearly love to find one; even better would be to watch the newly-hatched chicks jump fearlessly out of the hole, with an apparently misplaced belief that gravity doesn't apply to them. In fact the ducklings are very light and fluffy, so considerable air resistance dictates that a terminal velocity is quickly reached, enabling them to bounce slightly on landing without suffering ill-effects. In previous seasons I have encountered these large circular courtship flights over several parts of the wood, suggesting that more than one pair may be nesting in any given year.

Early-arriving migrants squeezed in before the guillotine action of a north-easterly airflow brought migration to a standstill, enabling chiffchaff (5th March) and blackcap (4th April) to arrive earlier than usual, and even the notoriously unpredictable nightingale (8th April) was first heard four days earlier than the long-term mean. A bird that evidently got held up by the reversion to a cold airflow was the willow warbler, first recorded on 11th April when, for the past forty years, it has almost invariably been heard singing sweetly in late March or the first week of April. Woodpecker drumming is already in sharp decline, the signs being of a rather indifferent year for great spotted woodpecker, and I have yet to record bullfinch, marsh tit or tree creeper, which is somewhat alarming. However, our largest breeding bird, the buzzard, seems to be doing rather well, and I regularly disturb this handsome raptor from trees near the paths.

Early spring weather seems so unpredictable these days that I no longer feel I even know what an 'average spring' is like. This year has been no exception, with only 5.0mm of rain in the 47 days since 26th February, when 71mm would have been expected. Consequently, the numerous dams installed the other year in an attempt to enable the wood to retain water for longer, have been unable to function as intended. By keeping parts of the wood damper through the spring and early summer it was hoped that vegetation would benefit, that this in turn would encourage stronger invertebrate populations, which might lead to some of our declining birds seeing a reversal of their fortunes. However, if no rain falls and the tiny streams feeding into the wood run dry, no amount of ditch-blocking is going to be of much use. A minor but slightly irritating side effect of this dry weather is that the paths are very uneven. In an ideal year the muddy paths dry out slowly at this season, enabling myriad feet to flatten out most of the irregularities, but this year every footprint, cycle track and tractor tyre imprint has been left 'fossilised', creating an irregular surface that makes for uncomfortable walking. Any rain we get now may be insufficient to turn the concrete consistency of the mud back to malleable putty; and unless we get monsoon quantities of rain, those dams are going to stand ideal for quite a few more months.

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