

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-May to mid-June 2025

Months can drift past with very little bird news to impart, but recent weeks have been rather more interesting, starting off with a golden oriole on 21st May. One of the old country names for the handsome yellow and black males (females are a duller green) is gypsy whistler, an allusion to the beautifully fluty song of the male, but alas, it was only the harsh, somewhat jay-like call that I heard, endlessly repeated. They tend to stay high up in the canopy, making them difficult to spot, but I think I glimpsed the bird once or twice as it flitted from branch to branch. Back in the late 1970s and into the 1980s it looked as though the golden oriole was colonising Kent, as there were a few breeding pairs in The Blean, with a pair definitely nesting on the RSPB reserve one year, and this continental species seemed just the right candidate to take advantage of climate change, which was certainly starting to make itself felt. Unfortunately, it wasn't to be, the birds lost their toehold in the county, and the population fizzled out. We can only hope that a new colonisation attempt at some future date will be more successful, and that one day these rather colourful birds with their lipstick-red beaks will once more bring a breath of the exotic Mediterranean into our local woods.

Then on 10th June I was carrying out my third and final woodcock count of the season, as part of a national BTO survey. Once again numbers were extremely low, and I was hanging around, waiting for the 75 minutes of the timed count to be up when I heard a very distant whirring sound, so quiet as to be almost subliminal, leaving me to wonder if I'd really heard it. Likened by some to a revving motorbike, the sound was a little clearer now, and I realised I really had heard a nightjar. This is a species that had made a better job of colonising the wood than the golden oriole and, since nesting for the first time in 1988, up to five territories had been established in subsequent years, and they gave every impression of having become a fixture in Blean Woods, but they, too, succumbed to the curse of The Blean and gradually died out this century. It was therefore really exciting to hear this bird churring, and when I'd completed the woodcock survey I was able to track down the nightjar to the small heath, where it was singing from a dead chestnut. Here's hoping this marks the return of a rather enigmatic bird. The same evening I heard and saw a raven flying over the wood, the first I had come across for many a month.

It's too early to say what sort of butterfly season lies in store for us, but two species have put in exceptionally early appearances. First was the heath fritillary which is now tending to appear earlier, and this year I was amazed to see one on 9th May, three days earlier than the previous record, set in 2011. Next was our largest butterfly, the silver-washed fritillary, which, like the heath fritillary, is also tending to emerge earlier. Not normally seen before late June to mid-July, this year I saw my first on 9th June, eleven days earlier than the previous first sighting. It seems our insects are paying no heed to the climate change deniers.

And finally, after an absence of over a year, we have 13 Bagot goats back on the large heath; these hardy black-and-white animals seem to be thriving, and their six kids are already putting on weight, so we look forward to seeing them make inroads to the forest of birch saplings that is threatening to overwhelm the heath.

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