

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-June to mid-July 2025

Little did I imagine when I moved to Canterbury in 1982 that I would one day have buzzards nesting in Blean Woods, and even in the small wood behind our house. The species became extinct in Kent in the late 18th or early 19th century, and for about 180 years was known to birdwatchers only as a scarce passage migrant or even rarer wintering birds. But from the mid-20th century, thanks to reduced persecution, they began moving steadily eastwards from their fastness in the South West, Wales and parts of Scotland. From 1986 very occasional sightings were claimed by visitors to Blean Woods, but it wasn't until 1998 that a pair summered in west Kent, with breeding confirmed in the same part of the county the following year. Just six years later there were an estimated 50 pairs in Kent, and at the time of the 2008-13 Kent atlas this figure had mushroomed to a guesstimated 1000-2000 pairs. We have become so used to their presence, soaring over woods and Downs, that it is worth reminding ourselves that it is only in the past twenty years that buzzards have started to be seen regularly on the reserve. So seemingly abundant are they now that it is a rare visit to the wood when I don't flush one from the side of a ride or track. This, in itself, I find of interest, as we tend to think of buzzards as being birds of fairly open countryside with perhaps just a scattering of trees or small woods. A fairly large, lumbering bird does not seem a likely candidate for a woodland denizen, but having watched them threading their way between the numerous oaks, I can vouch for their nimbleness, and it seems likely that they may be doing a considerable proportion of their hunting within the claustrophobic confines of the wood. I hesitate to hazard a guess as to how many there are in the wood, as I don't go looking for nests, and have only ever found one, but, to put it in extremely vague terms, there must be several pairs.

As usual, the butterfly transect has thrown up some surprises. Numbers were increasing very satisfactorily early in July, leading me to anticipate an average or better than average peak two or three weeks later but, to my astonishment, after only six days the count had dropped from 360 to 160. Two species that normally form a large part of the population – meadow brown and gatekeeper – were present in very disappointing numbers, the former possibly having its worst ever season, while the latter appears to have peaked already. I'll have a better idea of where this season is going in another two or three weeks, but all the signs are that this will not prove to be a memorable season for butterflies in general. Silver-washed fritillaries were doing well, and then suddenly crashed out in flames, but at least there were still a few white admirals for me to admire. Until recently all attention was focussed on declining birds – common garden birds as well as rarer species with more specific habitat requirements – but now concern is being expressed about the even greater losses of the invertebrate world. In typically anthropocentric fashion, we tend to designate wildlife that is small and hard to identify as simply biomass, in other words as food for more “interesting” creatures such as cuddly mammals or colourful birds. It is certainly true that when as much as three-quarters of the insect biomass is vanishing for poorly understood reasons, entire food webs are at risk of collapse. Anyone who is old enough to recall having to stop the car on long journeys to clean splatted insects off the windscreen will be able to vouch, albeit somewhat unscientifically, for this decline. Hotter, drier summers may well be partly to blame, although cool, wet years don't favour invertebrates either, and our hugely simplified agricultural systems must bear some of the responsibility. How many swallows have you seen swooping over the fields this summer?

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