

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-January to mid-February 2026

I'm writing this on Valentine's Day, which is traditionally said to be when birds pair up. Valentinus was a third century Roman priest who was martyred for disobeying the emperor, but we may have Chaucer to thank for popularising the priest's association with birds in the 14th century, though it wasn't until some 400 years later that the modern concept of Valentine's Day began to emerge, with the sending of cards and exchanging of gifts. But, while there is no evidence to support the view that all the birds suddenly seek mates on 14th February, this is definitely the month in which we get the feeling that winter's tectonic plate is starting to shift. It is certainly a treat at this time of year to start hearing birdsong stirring from its winter dormancy to remind us that Spring is on its way. Most conspicuous so far have been robin, great tit and song thrush, though others, such as dunno and blackbird are also tuning up. The robin is an interesting case, in that it can be heard occasionally throughout the winter, and we know that males and females both hold territories at this time. Many years ago, while working at a rather smaller woodland reserve in East Sussex, I decided to carry out a late autumn mapping survey of robin territories, using song registrations to define the boundaries of each territory. It gave me great satisfaction when repeating the survey the following Spring to discover that the number of territories had apparently halved, the clear implication being that each female had successfully paired up with a male and ceased maintaining a territory.

Much of the wood is covered in rather infertile soil, a fact that is revealed by the slow growth of trees. The first management I carried out at Blean Woods on arrival in 1982 was some experimental thinning of chestnut-birch coppice, killing the chestnut, and enabling the remaining thin coppice stems to develop into mature birch woodland, or high forest, as it is generally referred to in arboricultural circles. This managed block is close to the car park, and if you follow the waymarked trails from the car park, you first walk through an area with a mix of deciduous and coniferous trees before passing through the area I'm referring to. Even 43 years after the work was done, the trees still look remarkably young, and it is often hard to differentiate between retained birch stems and those which have regrown from cut stumps following the thinning operation. But the character of the area has certainly changed; largely absent is the formerly dominant chestnut, and the retained birches are certainly starting to develop the rugged black and white bark of mature trees (birch is a short-lived species, usually already over-mature if it survives to 80 or so). Maturing woodland can be expected to attract in wildlife that wasn't present when the land was managed as coppice on a rotation of perhaps twenty years, and I do on occasion now come across a great spotted woodpecker, and even the odd tree creeper, but it is still not a Mecca for birds of old stands. A smattering of young oak trees (standards) were already present way back in 1982, and all of those have been retained but, unsurprisingly, given the slow growth rate of oak compared to birch, these have yet to blossom into gnarled old veterans.

To end as I started – with a saint: if it rains on St Swithin's Day, legend has it that it will continue for the next forty days. As this particular saint's day won't fall until 15th July, the poor maligned bishop can't be blamed for our current run of appalling weather; my records show that we have endured rain on 37 of the past forty days. It is anyone's guess as to how much this is affecting the wildlife.

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