

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-February to mid-March 2026

It's already mid-March, and that means the 2026 breeding bird season is under way, with my third count carried out yesterday morning. With a light frost glistening on the ground, it was colder than I would have liked, but the sunny start gave me hope for a good survey, a promise that, unfortunately, was not to be fulfilled, with one of my poorest ever number of registrations.

However, one of the reasons for starting the surveys so early in the season is the hope of picking up lesser spotted woodpecker records, and I haven't been disappointed, with several birds encountered on each early morning visit. The lesser spotted woodpecker, or lesser spot as it is often familiarly known to birders, is rapidly becoming one of our fastest declining species. Though still to be found in most regions of England and Wales (but not in Scotland or Ireland), there have been moderate to severe declines throughout its range, with just small pockets where the trend is apparently being bucked. While also declining in Kent, the county is now one of its national strongholds, though occurring mainly in the Blean complex of woodlands, and scattered areas in central and western Kent. As recently as forty years ago, though a scarce bird even then, it was much more widespread, occurring in far more woods, and even extending into the woodland desert that is Thanet. Quite why the national population is in decline is not properly understood, although there are suggestions that breeding success is now lower, but that simply begs the question of why this diminutive woodpecker should have become less productive. My feeling is that the bird prefers open woodland, so its present Kent concentration in the mainly dense woodland of The Blean would suggest that it is not inhabiting prime habitat. It is generally recognised that our woods are drying out, thanks to the longer, hotter summers we now enjoy or endure, which perhaps results in less food being available to them, but this is no more than guesswork. Another possibility is that the lesser is suffering in competition with the great spotted woodpecker, which is increasing nationally; while the smaller bird tends to concentrate on hunting along thinner branches and twigs, leaving the more hefty boughs to its bigger cousin, there is probably sufficient overlap in their feeding preferences for this to be a feasible reason for the decline. My initial survey work this spring is suggestive of a relatively healthy population in the Blean Woods study area, but it remains to be seen how the rest of the season will evolve. The breeding season seems to progress in a series of waves, with early performers including lesser spots and blackbirds, but by the time key species like nightingales arrive, the calls and drumming of woodpeckers will be no more than distant memories.

My first chiffchaff was on the early date of 3rd March. In fact, this was my second earliest date in 45 years, and further evidence in support of the effects of climate change. I heard some three or four chiffchaffs that morning, so it is more than likely that one or two of them had already been in post for a day or two. Over the past 45 years there has been a fairly steady trend towards earlier arrivals and, whereas first records were, on average around 26th March in 1982, now the mean first date is 16 days earlier. Other birds have been hard to find, and yesterday morning hardly any great spotted woodpeckers or song thrushes were to be heard. Indeed, even the numerous wrens, blue and great tits were mute, and the wood seemed a sepulchral place to be wandering through.

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