

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-April to mid-May 2026

We all want to hear a nightingale each spring, but this has become increasingly difficult in recent seasons as numbers have declined. For nearly forty years the reserve population fluctuated between lows of 28 and a heady 58 back in 1989, but since 2021 the total has remained obdurately below 30; indeed, in 2024 and 2025 the magic figure was stuck at an uncomfortably low 20. So I suppose my provisional tally of 21 territories for this year can provide a little solace, although whether the decline has been halted, only time will tell. In recent years nearly all the nightingales have been in the less-visited western end of the reserve, so now that more coppicing is being carried out closer to the car park, this will, it is hoped, translate into more nightingales for visitors to be enthralled by in the coming years. Managing for nightingales is a bit like the task of maintaining a healthy population of heath fritillaries, and can be summarised as a great deal of work for only a short period of demonstrable results. Both these key species respond very positively to management conducted in targeted areas, but the habitat will only remain suitable for a limited period; in the case of the fritillaries this could be as little as two years, while for nightingales the benefits typically last about four years.

In my last article I commented on the low overall number of registrations I was getting on my early morning bird surveys; this continued through April and into May, making this one of the quietest seasons I can recall; even the normally ubiquitous wren often failed to punctuate long stretches of my route with its powerful song. One of the joys of these visits had always been hearing the cuckoo on a more or less daily basis from sometime in the second half of April and then right through May. Alas, that is but a distant memory. Admittedly, I spend far less time on the reserve since retirement, but the past six years have passed without my hearing a single cuckoo on or near the reserve. Since the 1990s the English population of this national treasure has declined by nearly 80%, while in Scotland numbers are actually rising. There are a number of potential reasons for this, revolving around food availability, climate change and numbers of the host species that are obliged to rear the usurping cuckoo chicks, but one of the more intriguing possibilities concerns the migration route taken. All our birds overwinter in the Zaire and Congo region of Africa, then take a western route northwards in spring, passing through Spain. However, in the autumn there is a split; English-breeding birds tend to retrace their earlier flight down through Spain, but Scottish birds mostly adopt a more easterly passage through Italy, then crossing the central Sahara Desert to join up with their English counterparts in the Congo. While we don't yet know why there should be this divergence, it is quite possible that it accounts for at least part of the differing fortunes of the birds breeding in Scotland and England. Is it now too late to rescue this much-lamented harbinger of spring?

On a happier note, my weekly butterfly transects have shown some promise, with the highest ever totals for late April and early May, mostly brimstones. This does not, however, necessarily translate into a good butterfly year as the brimstone is one of the few common butterflies that overwinter as an adult, so the conditions its various life stages encounter may differ radically from species that pass the winter months as eggs, caterpillars or pupae.

Michael Walter
michaelwalter434@gmail.com
01227 462491