

Blean Woods National Nature Reserve

Mid-May to mid-June 2026

The goats are back! Our heathland is now being browsed by 21 of the old English Bagot animals, a mix of adults and endearing kids with their goofy looks and behaviour, and horns that are little more than buds. They were initially in an area of the heath where about ten ponds were recently created. Why the approximation? – well, when the water level rises, what is currently a string of discrete pools will merge into just one or two. Although incredibly raw at present – the infertile soil won't permit a diverse range of plants to become established – one pond was already graced by a pair of mallard, and it was heartening to see that most contained some water despite the arid conditions of the past two months. It will be fascinating to see how quickly these water bodies are colonised by plants and animals. Mallard or moorhen might nest, green sandpipers could well drop in on migration, and snipe crop up occasionally in the wood in winter – I even had a flock of 40 back in 1988!

One of the studies I undertake each spring is the British Trust for Ornithology's Breeding Birds Survey, which involves walking a 2km transect, counting all the birds I see or hear, placing each record into one of three distance bands. An alarming trend has been for the total number of birds seen on each of the two annual visits to decline fairly steadily over the past 32 years, from 250 then to 150 now, which is a dramatic 40% drop. How to explain this calamitous decline? Agricultural intensification is often hauled out as the putative villain, but it is hard to imagine that the woodland habitat is massively influenced by what goes on beyond its borders. A more recent whipping boy is climate change, now often injected with a sense of panicked urgency by being referred to as the climate crisis. The effects of our deteriorating climate can reasonably be thought of as having an impact on any or all of the species to be found in Blean Woods.

The painted lady is one of our most remarkable butterflies; unable to survive British winters, it migrates here from arid areas of northern Africa in very variable numbers each year. This stupendous feat is achieved in two or even three stages, with the adults stopping off in southern Europe to breed, so passing the baton to a new generation of butterflies to continue the northward journey. I have already seen a few in the wood and my garden, and the particularly early arrival has led some to suggest that we are in for a painted lady summer, such as happened in 1996 and again in 2009, when millions of the attractive insects moved into the country on a broad front, and there were hundreds in Blean Woods.

The nightingale situation is looking slightly less precarious this year. Combining territories found by Sam and Rob with my own less comprehensive surveys this spring produces a likely total of 30, a massive 50% increase on last year. However, that still only brings the population up to the level of what would have been classed as a very poor season as recently as seven years ago, and there is a long way to go before we can regain the glory days of the 1980s, when up to 58 territories were recorded. Will that ever be possible? With all the issues now confronting wildlife, from climate change to habitat loss, this seems increasingly unlikely.

It seems to have been an exceptionally poor season for heath fritillaries, not helped by cool, wet weather keeping them out of sight during the ten-day period that probably coincided with peak numbers. I'll have more of an analysis in my next report.

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