

Parish Nightjar Walk "Churlwood East" & "Reservoir"

14 June 2021 was a magical evening.

We commenced promptly at 20:45 hrs, the evening looking promising for Nightjar activity after sunset (21:14 hrs) with a temperature of 22 Celsius and light winds.

As we walked, spaced apart, down the wide track from the car park a

GARDEN WARBLER chortled excitedly from a mixture of birch scrub and gorse. Small flocks of LINNETS flew up from the track where they had been feeding and as we approached took refuge in the safety of gorse thickets as our party diverted round to the top of a bank. STONECHATS were calling and we saw one briefly on top of gorse. We passed round and down the side of a large pond and enjoyed the view west towards a red horizon, the sun having set.



Pausing briefly to scan the open heath we walked on towards a Nightjar territory. It was now just before sunset and several of us heard a male DARTFORD WARBLER giving a last burst of his scratchy song before retiring for the night, safe within thick gorse.

Then at 21:15, almost 20 minutes before we expected it, a male NIGHTJAR raised our hopes by giving a brief rendition of his "churring" song, likened in olden days to the sound of a spinning wheel in motion: hence the old Sussex name for this mysterious bird "Wheelbird". This male may possibly have arrived late to his breeding grounds here on Ashdown Forest due to unseasonal downpours throughout May 2021. He will have come, year on year, from his wintering grounds in Africa south of the Congo rainforest.

To our great surprise and delight a male NIGHTJAR flew across the ride in front of us, in such good light that several of us could clearly see the prominent white wing patches near his long narrow wing-tips. These white wing patches, and those on his long tail, are used in courtship to attract a male and to ward off rivals.

As we walked slowly along all was quiet. We cupped hands to ears to amplify the distant sound of any "churring". While doing so some of the party spotted one or more deer in bracken and a Ranger heard briefly the final song of a

CUCKOO in the distance. Churring had re-commenced, probably by a second male NIGHTJAR to the south near an area of scattered Scots Pines enclosed by fencing to contain some handsome Exmoor ponies.

All went silent until at 21:40 the first male NIGHTJAR started "churring" again as the moon shone high above. Then we waited as the NIGHTJAR ceased churring. When he made his squeaky "goo-ik" flight-call we knew he was on the move and most of us saw the NIGHTJAR flitting above and around the top of gorse bushes and open bare ground giving us very clear views. He came very close as we watched his jerky flight, with strange in-flight pauses of his long, falcon-like wings.

At 21:46 all of us managed to see a NIGHTJAR come very close to our standing group, quite unconcerned by our presence as he twisted and turned in flight, swooping upwards to catch flying moths and beetles. Not for nothing have they been nick-named "Nighthawks". We were given even more flight-displays as we watched in awe until at around 22:00 hrs we had to leave his "churring".

CLIVE POOLE, assisted by ROGER GRAY, VOLUNTARY RANGERS