

Parish Birds -Seventy Years of Change –(European) Nightjar



Having recalled that, during a long interview with Paul Marten in March 2022, he had recounted some historical facts about the occurrence of the **Nightjar** in Danehill, it seemed timely to include them in wider article. So here goes!

This is a mysterious nocturnal bird, its song

rarely identified by locals and even more rarely seen. Various species of the NIGHTJAR family inhabit the New and Old Worlds, but only one species migrates north annually from Southern Africa to Northern Europe. This is the (European) Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*). It flies to us, in stages, by night to time its arrival in mid-May with the emergence of large nocturnal moths and flying beetles on which its diet depends. Because the NIGHTJAR migrates by night it is not subject to the hunting pressures in Southern Europe inflicted on day-flying migrant birds from Africa. Individuals have apparently been doing this successfully for thousands of years to arrive in the relatively mild climate of Sussex where they breed on areas of permanent heathland and, if the conditions are right, in young conifer plantations.

The male of this species, immediately after arrival on his heathland territory, proclaims ownership by emitting, soon after sunset on warm evenings, a strange, mechanical, eerie, continuous reeling sound known as “churring “. This gave the bird its old Sussex nickname of “ Wheelbird “.In the centuries before the Industrial Revolution, when our ancestors walked at dusk in the summer across the widespread heathland between villages, they would commonly hear a sound like that of a spinning wheel in motion. Other names for this mysterious bird in English folklore include “Fern Owl” (due to its location near bracken), “Goatsucker“ (due to a suspicion that at nighttime it sucked the blood of goats!) and “Eve-churr “. About the size of a Collared Dove and with a silhouette in flight in size and shape recalling that of a Kestrel, the bird is unmistakable after sunset, having the heath and its large insects to itself . Newly arrived in mid-May the male NIGHTJAR, after churring from a branch, typically a Scots pine or Oak,

will fly around open heather heath, clapping its wings in stilted flight, showing off its stark white wing spots to attract a female.

Female Nightjars nest on the ground, making a scrape typically in heather or on bare earth in which the female deposits a clutch of two white eggs (occasionally three) in late May. A second brood may follow. She incubates on the ground, being fed by the male who sometimes shares nighttime incubation duties. In daytime he perches on a horizontal branch, lying parallel with it and cryptically camouflaged with grey and brown mottled feathers. The young Nightjars after fledging and leaving the nest, will prepare to leave Sussex in August, flying alone, nocturnally, through Southern Europe over the Sahara to their wintering grounds in the savannahs as far south as South Africa. The adult Nightjars leave our heaths in the parish a month later, in September. My latest observation was to disturb a pair by accident on the heathland floor north of the Isle of Thorns in early September.

Paul Marten, a life-long local resident, recalls that larch plantations were planted along both sides of Freshfield Lane in about 1957 on previously farmed fields: different heights of saplings being fenced-off with rabbit fencing. This was done similarly at the southern end of Cowstocks Wood. He remembered how, once given over to plantation saplings, Nightjars would opportunistically colonise the areas in the early years after planting, when the conifer saplings were short, the spaces between them being either bare earth or short vegetation, ideal for a female Nightjar to locate her nest. Once the plantation larch saplings had grown to exceeding 2-3 metres in height these breeding areas became no longer suitable for this enigmatic bird.

I moved to Chelwood Gate in 2006 and have been very fortunate to observe Nightjard in our parish in every summer between then and now. This mysterious bird can be heard (and seen if you know how and when to look for it) on summer evenings with temperatures over 15°C, no rain and absence of wind all across the northern heathland areas of the parish. Their territories are spread from Macmillan Clump and Churlwood in the west, stretching north of the Isle of Thorns and along the Old Airstrip and beyond east towards Chelwood Vachery.

Why not, instead of watching “the box” choose a warm evening in August with a clear sky, no rain, no wind and venture onto our heath about 20 minutes after sunset. It could be magical!!

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