

Hobby Breeding Success on Ashdown Forest West Chase 2023



It may come as no surprise that an area the size of Ashdown Forest, with its mosaic of woodland, farmland and extensive heathland, hosts several scarce birds of prey (termed “raptors” by ornithologists).

One of these is the Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*), a member of the Falcon family, similar in size to a Kestrel. The Hobby is a summer visitor to England from Tropical Africa, arriving in Sussex in Spring. Due to climate change (global warming) the arrival here of this dapper bird has become earlier

and earlier each decade. Average arrival date in 1971 was 30 April but by 2001 was a good fortnight earlier, around 15 April.

Ashdown Forest is a stronghold in Sussex for this scarce annual visitor, but even so only a few pairs arrive here annually to breed. Initially, hunting over boggy areas and heath, they prefer to prey mainly on large insects such as dragonflies and damselflies but if they arrive before these insects are on the wing they hunt small birds such as Skylarks. In April and May the adult birds are secretive and mainly silent. Only after the young fledge from the nest in late July or early August is the presence of these elegant raptors revealed by the shrill calls of the juvenile begging constantly for food from the adults.

Often they will have chosen to rear their young in an abandoned Carrion Crow’s nest, typically situated high up in a Scots Pine giving clear views over the surrounding heathland, farmland and ponds. The timing of the Hobby’s breeding, late in the summer is synchronised with the fledging of the small birds on which they will feed their Hobby chicks, in particular (Barn)Swallows, House Martins, Swifts and Starlings. This glut of young and inexperienced small birds maximises the chance of the Hobby catching sufficient food for its own hungry young.

In August of 2023 my attention was drawn to sounds coming from a copse of mature Scots Pines (and nearby birches) on the edge of woodland and



Adult Hobby at Press Ridge Warren

heathland in a part of the west Chase of Ashdown Forest . From the lofty pines a constant high screeching was emanating. Excitedly and silently I moved slowly towards the sounds, scanning through and on top of the trees with binoculars. The reward of patience was to spot, from a distance, a juvenile Hobby shrieking extremely noisily to its parents, casting caution to the wind

as it clamoured for food. Throughout August 2023, on rain-free days, the juvenile could be heard and seen on the top of a favoured Scots Pine emitting its constant calls, while the adult parents flew around frantically trying to catch prey for it. Spectacular food passes were observed between the Hobbies, which were a delight to observe as one bird in mid-flight dropped a prey item into the waiting talons of the other, far above the heath below. The adult Hobbies looked reminiscent of small Peregrine Falcons, but much slimmer and more streamlined with very elongated wings. The adults display a rusty vent and are altogether smarter looking than the juvenile they have produced!

By early September 2023 the adult Hobbies had vacated their territory on the west Chase to begin the long migration to tropical Africa where they would spend winter. The pair had left the now fully-grown juvenile Hobby to fend for itself and it could be seen on a bare branch of a Scots Pine for several days, silently waiting for passing prey birds on which to sustain itself. Then its migratory urge called it too to leave in early October for the long journey to its African wintering grounds. A magical spell on the west Chase of the Forest had ended for another season.

CLIVE POOLE, retired Voluntary Ranger