

REPORT OF BIRDLIFE ON ASHDOWN FOREST within the Parish of Danehill & Chelwood Gate, FEBRUARY TO APRIL 2021 DURING 3RD LOCKDOWN

February 2021 was cold as usual but the weather was not severe enough to



kill off our population of rare resident **DARTFORD WARBLERS**. They could be heard calling while sheltering in thick gorse, where they hunted for spiders, their crucial winter diet. Occasionally a fleeting glimpse of a tiny dark -coloured long-tailed bird would confirm the presence of a “ furze wren “, the old Sussex name for Dartford Warbler. They rely on heather for nesting and gorse

(furze) for shelter and most of their food supply. Dartfords do not migrate unlike most of our other warblers.

Our second avian relative UK rarity is the **WOODLARK** and our breeding population arrived back on the Forest in early February from their wintering grounds on the South coast or across the Channel (without needing to comply with lockdown restrictions). This season they have benefited locally



from the gorse-management activities of the Conservators who have removed some large blocks of very tall, old straggly gorse, useless for wildlife. This has left areas of bare ground, gorse litter and scattered seeds; just the job for **WOODLARKS** who are opportunistic colonisers after fire damage or major ground disturbance. They, paradoxically, both feed and breed on the ground on open heaths (*not* in woods despite their name) searching the bare and battered ground for seeds and insects. They can also be found feeding in areas of short grass grazed by rabbits . Listen for their beautiful “yodelling “ song-flight.

An early surprise was to find a male **REDSTART** on 30th March 2021. He had arrived about a week earlier than usual, making use of a couple of warm



days with southerly winds to stage the final leg (across the Channel), of his long journey from his wintering grounds in Gambia or even further south in tropical Africa. He was singing from a mature Scots pine in a

pine copse near the old airstrip favoured annually by **REDSTARTS** for breeding on Ashdown. A second male had occupied a traditional territory in a clump of similarly tall Scots pines at the north end of the Isle of Thorns by 7TH April . Being a hole-nesting species they look for cavities in Scots pines or birches made by Great Spotted Woodpeckers choosing a suitable one to raise their brood. Ashdown holds the majority of the Sussex population of this colourful summer visitor due to its habitat. The “start” portion of the name derives from the Old English “steort” meaning tail; hence redtail, describing the prominent rusty tail which it constantly flicks .These birds have evidently been familiar to our ancestors for many centuries, though not to the average walker of the 21st Century.

Another early summer visitor this year was a **WILLOW WARBLER**, a male singing his beautiful song, high notes rising and then descending, as he sang



from willow and birch scrub in a ‘gorsey’ area just west of the old airstrip on 7th April 2021. He had evidently also taken advantage of the ‘window’ of warm weather with southerly winds to assist the final stage of his flight over the English Channel from tropical West Africa. Ashdown is a” hotspot” for breeding **WILLOW WARBLERS** in Sussex; they

favour Ashdown’s altitude with its relatively cooler summer temperatures than the rest of Sussex.

This year a little later than the Redstarts has come a trickle of **TREE PIPITS**, also having spent our winter in the warmer climes of tropical West Africa. This is in contrast to its closely related but much commoner relative the Meadow Pipit which summers and breeds most commonly in northern Britain and is mainly



Johann du Preez

seen in winter on Ashdown heaths. You could say they swap residence on the Forest! An early male **TREE PIPIT** could be heard on 5th April from the top of a mature Scots Pine west of Chelwood Vachery emitting his characteristic territorial song, warding off potential rivals on that hillside covered in purple moor

grass and some heather and a few scattered pines. Another ground-nesting bird, Ashdown holds the majority of Sussex's breeding population of this declining visitor –because of its extensive suitable heath land. .

Look for a bird singing from the very top of a tall tree which suddenly launches itself up into the air, and continues to sing in a 'parachuting' reckless dive often back to the same perch. That maniac you saw was a **TREE PIPIT!**

As a break from searching hard for the "little brown jobs" you might like to watch the top of thickets of extensive thick gorse as you walk along the main paths through the heath. A noisy "ee-chuck " sounding like two pebbles being knocked together coming from a bird smaller than (but



related to) a Robin flitting along the top of the gorse will be a **STONECHAT**. The males are dressed in smart breeding plumage now, with black faces, white collars and wing-patches and rusty -coloured breasts. Females are duller in plumage. They rely on the gorse for nest-sites and as perches. Watch them drop down to the path to collect a small insect and return to their perch.

Stonechats stay on the Forest for most of the year, only leaving temporarily in the harshest winter weather.

CLIVE POOLE, Voluntary Ranger 8th April 2021