

The Forest of Dean

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th February – 1st March 2020

Tour Participants - Marcus John (Leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

Summary

The Forest of Dean is an ancient royal hunting forest where areas of oak woodland are interspersed with more conventional coniferous plantations. The rich history of this area is reflected in the mosaic of habitats that have been preserved within its historic boundaries. Despite the wintry weather, we enjoyed good views of scarce breeding birds, including Hawfinch and Goshawk. Best of all, we re-found a wintering Great Grey Shrike. Mammals sightings included both Fallow and Roe Deer, as well as a big male Wild Boar.

Day 1

Friday 28th February

We gathered before dinner in the historic Speech House Hotel, our base for this tour. Our leader, Marcus John, gave us an introduction to the natural history of the area, outlining our itinerary for the tour and the target species that we hoped to see. We then enjoyed the first of several excellent meals, before heading to bed full of expectation for the weekend ahead.

Day 2

Saturday 29th February

We met shortly after dawn for a pre-breakfast visit to Parkend. On the way, a couple of the group spotted what appeared to be a small group of Wild Boar disappearing into the shadowy trees - but most of us missed them. There were no Hawfinches to be seen at Parkend but we did appreciate a flock of 60 Redwings and six Mistle Thrush that were feeding on the green just behind the hotel on our return. And a cooked breakfast always tastes better after an early walk!

We headed off to Nagshead RSPB reserve after breakfast; despite the cold wind and heavy sleet showers, we enjoyed watching common woodland birds including several Treecreepers. When the sun finally appeared, we headed off to New Fancy View where we quite quickly found two distant displaying Goshawks. It was instructive to watch these big raptors in the company of a Sparrowhawk and a pair of Ravens. Better still, just as we were about to leave, a single bird flew very close, allowing us to fully appreciate its size and powerful flight action. We completed our morning at Cannop Ponds, where we had close views of a total of 21 Mandarin Ducks, the drakes in pristine breeding plumage. When the sleet returned with a vengeance, we headed for the Fountain Inn and a well-deserved lunch.



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The weather remained showery and windy as we set off for Symond's Yat. We soon found one of the resident Peregrines perched in a tall tree and everyone had excellent views through the 'scope before it flew down across the river Wye. The viewpoint at Yat Rock offers unusual views of raptors as they frequently soar below eye-level; at one point, there were six Buzzards in the air together!

We had another excellent dinner at the Speech House (in the atmospheric surroundings of the 17th Century Verderers Courtroom) before setting off for our night drive. Despite the wet weather, we saw both Roe and Fallow Deer close to the road. Our main quarry was Wild Boar and just as it seemed we were out of luck, we spotted a large bulky shape on the grassy verge in front of a row of houses. We quickly pulled over and spent the next few minutes in the company of a large male; what a way to complete a memorable day!

Day 3

Sunday 1st March

Most of us rose early to go in search of Hawfinch before breakfast, but once again we had no luck, although the Redwing flock behind the hotel had grown to over 100 birds. After a delicious cooked breakfast, we headed back to New Fancy View and enjoyed watching two more Goshawks as they displayed above the canopy.

The rest of the morning was spent on a longer walk out to Crabtree Hill. Here the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust are recreating lowland heath, and we soon found an obliging male Stonechat, so typical of this habitat. As we walked up to the top of the gentle hill, we saw a whitish bird perched in a low tree. When we approached a little closer, we realised that we had found a Great Grey Shrike! It was almost immediately flushed by a group of walkers, so we were delighted when it perched up again and we were all able to enjoy good views through the 'scope. For most of us, this was surely the bird of the tour!

After a light lunch back at the hotel, we set off to walk around the Yewtree Brake area, not far from the hotel. We soldiered on despite the heavy sleet showers and along Spruce Ride we finally had our reward. We followed up a distinctive call to find a pair of Hawfinches perched high in a Larch tree. We all had a good look at them through the 'scope, appreciating their subtly beautiful plumage and of course those massive bills. When they flew, we realised that they were, in fact, part of a flock of ten birds. As we made our way back towards the vehicle, some of us also saw a lone Brambling, another sought-after finch species. All too soon, it was time to return to the hotel and say our goodbyes.

Despite the wintry weather, we had enjoyed a very successful weekend in the Forest of Dean. The comfortable Speech House Hotel is the ideal base from which to explore the forest. The avian highlights included Goshawk, Hawfinch and Great Grey Shrike, whilst the Wild Boar seen on our night drive will live long in the memory.

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February/March 2020		
			28	29	1
1	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		10	
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		15	
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		2	
4	Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>		21	
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		4	
7	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		6	
8	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2	
9	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		10	
10	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		14	3
11	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	1
12	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		5	2
13	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		4	
14	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		4	
15	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	
16	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	
17	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		12	
18	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
19	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		2	H
20	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	
21	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>			1
22	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		6	2
23	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓
24	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓
25	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓
26	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
27	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
28	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			H
29	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	H	6	2
30	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	1	H
31	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		3	1
32	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		2	
33	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	
34	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	6	4
35	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		60+	100+
36	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	1	6	6
37	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		6	5
38	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	4	2

	Common name	Scientific name	February/March 2020		
			28	29	1
39	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		1	
40	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		4	
41	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		2	H
42	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
43	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			1
44	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			10
45	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		6	

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	February/March 2020		
			28	29	1
1	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>		3	
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			1
3	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		5	
4	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	✓