

# *New Forest Biodiversity Forum*

## **New Forest Woodland Bird Resurvey**

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A resurvey of woodland passerine and near-passerine birds was conducted in the central New Forest in 2022, with the aim of repeating surveys conducted in 2009-11 to assess decadal change. Breeding abundance and distribution trends were primarily obtained via a roving survey in the May-June period, covering a block of woodland centred on Bolderwood and Rhinefield that covers nearly 40 km<sup>2</sup>. This was supplemented by a monthly survey that provided information on temporal distribution and detectability of target species through the year. Both surveys were effort-based, with the same two experienced observers using pre-determined transects over consistent time periods.

A total of 21 species were surveyed, of which nine increased, eight decreased, and four were broadly stable. The total number of birds recorded during the roving survey remained relatively stable at around 2500 birds, with an insignificant increase of just 8% between the 2009-11 and 2022 survey periods. However, this overall result masks major differences between species with different migration strategies, with all but one of the long-distance summer migrants showing decreasing trends, the two medium/long-distance summer migrants showing moderate increasing trends, and most of the resident species showing stable or increasing trends; in most cases these survey results are consistent with regional and national trends.

Of the long-distance summer migrants, the dramatic decline of Wood Warbler is of particular concern, having gone from an average of 105 territories in 2009-11 to no more than two or three singing males recorded in the survey area in 2022. Cuckoo, Willow Warbler, and Garden Warbler are also showing moderate to major decreasing trends. Perhaps surprisingly, all four of these species appear to be decreasing more rapidly in the New Forest than regionally or nationally, whereas Tree Pipits appears to be declining less rapidly, potentially due to increased availability of suitable habitat through establishment of clearfell following removal of non-native conifers.

In contrast, most resident and medium/long-distance migrant species including Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Firecrest, and Siskin, are increasingly abundant and widespread in the central New Forest, while others such as Marsh Tit and Crossbill appear to be at least stable and possibly increasing (the latter two in contrast to declining regional and national trends, which may reflect the relative stability of their New Forest habitats compared to those in the wider countryside). The survey did throw up some surprises, including major increasing trends for Spotted Flycatcher and Bullfinch that contrast with decreasing regional and national trends.

There is some evidence that habitat restoration work may be benefitting resident and short-distance migrant species that are showing increasing trends; this includes

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Woodlark benefitting from heathland restoration through removal of non-native conifers, and Grey Wagtail benefitting from stream restoration through increased availability of natural wetland habitat. However, ongoing removal of non-native conifers as part of the Forest Design Plan will likely have negative impacts for species that are reliant upon that habitat for nest sites and food, including Goldcrest, Crossbill, and Siskin.

Overall, the data presented in this study show a complex and fast-changing picture for the woodland bird assemblage in the New Forest; the next resurvey is scheduled for 2030, and will no doubt reveal further changes and surprises!