

New Forest Biodiversity Forum

New Forest raptor monitoring

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I have been studying many of the New Forest's key bird species for 36 years, but this short talk will concentrate on those raptor species falling into the specially protected or Schedule One category, where their protection from legitimate forestry operations during the breeding season was the key driver for much of my studies.

My work started with sparrowhawks, which along with common buzzard were the main woodland nesting raptors, and at a time when the timber inclosures were providing a habitat structure well suited to them.

As the forest woodland structure has changed, driven by new design plans and conservation objectives, we have seen species dynamics change. Alongside this we have also monitored the arrival of a top woodland bird predator: the goshawk. Since the first breeding in 2002, we have closely followed its rapid population rise to around 50 occupied territories, while trying to understand its effect on the other birds of prey present. Our work with goshawk has covered extensive productivity records and ringing over 500 young. During this time, we have also seen a marked decrease in numbers of breeding sparrowhawk and hobby on the open forest as the goshawk population has risen.

We have continued to slowly add to our knowledge of the scarce honey buzzard, where colour ringing of chicks has provided ground-breaking insights into the movements of these birds. We have had New Forest colour ringed birds return to breed here, seen birds ringed in other counties breeding in the New Forest, and set longevity records for a colour ringed bird which we proved breeding in three different counties over a thirteen-year period. The New Forest breeding population has always ebbed and flowed over the years, with a high in 2000, but breeding numbers are again showing a dip when overall numbers in the UK seem to be increasing and could again be the effects of our high goshawk population.

As intimated earlier, successful breeding records for hobby are at an all-time low, well down into single figures. We have camera evidence of direct predation by goshawk on young nestling hobby, but other factors could be at play. Key prey species like day flying moths and hirundines are much scarcer than they once were and show no sign of improvement, and the removal of open forest scots pine (seen by some as an unwanted non-native) which provides their preferred nesting sites could be pushing them into closer proximity with the woodland nesting goshawk.

There have been many changes to our New Forest birds over the last 30 years, some winners and some losers, but it highlights the need for continued monitoring to better understand the drivers for this.