



WHERE TO WATCH BIRDS IN SOMERSET, GLOUCESTERSHIRE & WILTSHIRE

FOURTH EDITION

KEN HALL



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& WILTSHIRE**

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Illustrations by John Govett

H E L M

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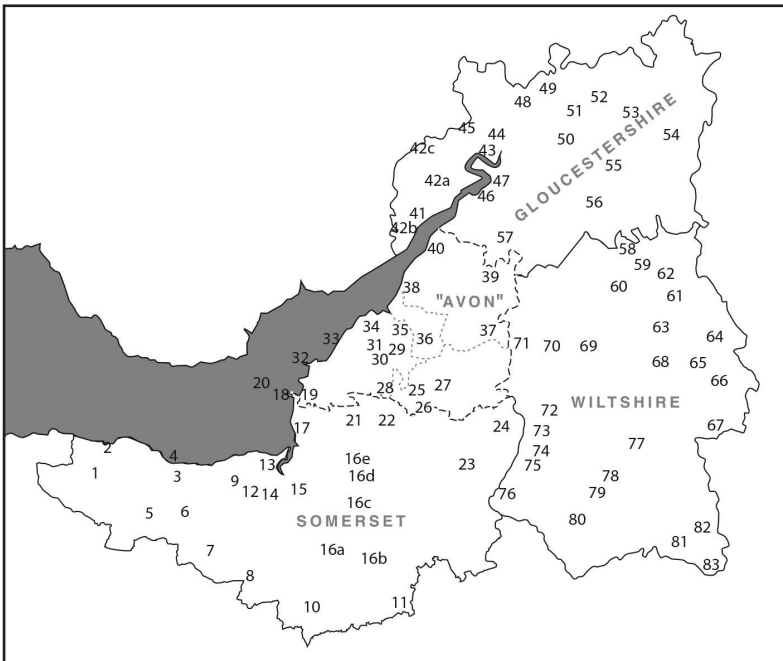
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KEY TO SITES



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In updating this new edition, I have revisited all the sites in the area, often on multiple occasions and at different times of the year. This was both to check the access, but also to make sure that the species mentioned do have a reasonable chance of being found. During these visits I have chatted to many other observers, including reserve wardens and local birders, who have freely provided additional background details. There are far too many to mention individually, although their names have in many cases appeared in previous editions, but I would like to record my thanks to all of them here, and to those with whom I have corresponded by phone, letter or email.

I have also drawn heavily on the various online sites where observations are published, often on a daily basis, for various 'local patches', varying from major sites like Steart Marshes, Blagdon Lake, Severnside, Slimbridge and the Cotswold Water Park, to spots that are barely more than a garden. They change too frequently to be listed in full, but the main sources where sightings are collected on a regional basis are listed under 'Organisations' towards the back of the book. Also listed there are the names of the main reports covering the region, which could not exist without the records submitted by local observers. Again, I am much in their debt.

In addition to those annual reports, I have referred extensively to the more recent county and regional avifaunas and atlases. The principal ones are:

For Somerset: *The Birds of Somerset* compiled by the Somerset Ornithological Society (Alan Sutton 1988); *A History of the Birds of Somerset* by D. K. Ballance (Isabelline Books 2006); *Somerset Atlas of Breeding and Wintering Birds, 2007–2012* edited by David Ballance *et al.* (Somerset Ornithological Society 2014); *The Birds of Exmoor and the Quantocks* by David Ballance, Brian Gibbs & Roger Butcher (Isabelline Books 2016).

For the Bristol area: *Avon Atlas 2007–11* edited by Richard Bland.

For Gloucestershire: *Birds of the Cotswolds* edited by Iain Main, Dave Pearce & Tim Hutton (Liverpool University Press 2009); *The Birds of Gloucestershire* edited by Gordon Kirk & John Phillips for the Gloucestershire Ornithological Coordinating Committee (Liverpool University Press 2013), incorporating the results of the county's 2017–2011 tetrad atlas.

For Wiltshire: *Wiltshire Birds* edited by James Ferguson-Lees *et al.* (Wiltshire Ornithological Society 2007), incorporating the results of the 1995–2000 atlas.

Gary Thoburn kindly supplied the cover photographs, all taken within the region, Brian Southern drew the maps, and Molly Arnold, from the publishers, patiently guided the project through the production process.

Finally, I must thank John Govett who was my co-author on the previous editions, primarily concentrating on Wiltshire and parts of Gloucestershire. He was not able to be involved on this occasion, but a selection of his illustrations has once again been used.

INTRODUCTION

The first edition of this guide was published in 1988, and the 30 or so years that have elapsed between then and the appearance of this fourth edition have seen many changes in both the habitats and their attendant wildlife in the region. The county of 'Avon' disappeared – not physically, of course, but in name at least, having been replaced by four unitary authorities. Although this has provided an opportunity to contract the title of the book, the term 'Avon' still occurs in several places as a useful shorthand, referring to the area around Bristol still used for recording purposes by local birders.

The counties of Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire continue to be very much border country between the primarily lowland arable east and the upland pasture of the west. This is true not only of the geology and the land usage, but also of the birdlife that distinguishes the region from other parts of Britain, with many species reaching the edge of their range here, whether from the west or from the east. The heather-dominated hills and combes of Exmoor still hold many of their specialities, but Red Grouse have followed the Black into local extinction, and sadly Ring Ouzels also seem to have gone the same way, although they are still regular spring and autumn migrants here, as well as on the coast. For a time they were replaced by a healthy population of Dartford Warblers, but a series of cold winters has knocked them back, although they have started to increase once again more recently and return to their former haunts.

Woodland specialities such as Pied Flycatchers, Redstarts and Wood Warblers can still be found in the western half of the region in reasonable numbers, although they have become increasingly patchily distributed in the east. In many cases the local habitats have not changed very obviously, although the increased grazing pressure exerted by a booming deer population has been suggested as a possible contributory cause. It may be that developments on the wintering grounds of these long-distance migrants may be another factor, although several of the resident species such as Marsh and Willow Tits have also undergone significant declines.

Nightingales remain patchily distributed, but although right on the edge of their range, there is no obvious cause for their fluctuating numbers, with habitat factors no doubt being more important. Birds more typical of rolling downland and farmland, such as Red-legged Partridges and Corn Buntings, continue to maintain healthy populations in eastern Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, but have all declined in the more pastoral regions further west. Tree Sparrows have mostly disappeared from Somerset and Gloucestershire, but the provision of nest boxes, allied to various agri-environmental schemes, is bearing fruit on the Marlborough Downs and in south-west Wiltshire. Hopefully, something similar might be undertaken in other areas, the only way, no doubt, to bring back species like the Turtle Dove, now quite a rarity in the region.

It is by no means all doom and gloom, however, as there are many other species that are currently doing very well. Climate change must be playing a part in this, but the efforts of the various conservation bodies have helped provide more suitable habitat for several of the birds involved, particularly on

the Somerset Levels. Drainage in this unique wetland area remains a continuing source of conflict, but major work by the RSPB, Somerset Wildlife Trust and Natural England in particular, together with an encouraging number of farmers, has improved the habitat for both birds and wildlife in general quite spectacularly over huge areas. Not only have the water levels been raised in the damp fields of West Sedgemoor, to the benefit of both breeding waders and wintering wildfowl, but the worked-out peatland west of Glastonbury – the Avalon Marshes – has been converted into a fascinating mosaic of reedbeds, meadows and swampy woodland that attracts a wide variety of birds throughout the year. The whole area has rapidly become one of the most important wetland habitats in the south-west.

The Bittern is perhaps the most emblematic species, with numbers of ‘booming’ males well into double figures. They are now established in quite a few reedbeds, although it may take a bit of patience to actually set eyes on one. On the other hand, rather more visible on the average visit are Little Egrets, not only now seen frequently here and at many other wetland sites, but nesting in several widely spaced places. The related Great White Egret has moved even more rapidly from extreme rarity to breeding species, wandering birds turning up at a wide variety of spots where there is any water, and some spectacular post-breeding assemblies at the Bristol reservoirs. Cattle Egrets, Little Bitterns and Night Herons have also raised young successfully in Somerset on at least one occasion, while the explosive song of Cetti’s Warbler is a characteristic sound of many damp corners of all three counties.

Turning to the River Severn, and especially its estuary, there is constant pressure to drain and build on the wetlands all along its shores, with the Cardiff Bay project across on the Welsh side being just one of many controversial schemes either completed or planned. But so far the most intrusive of these (e.g. an airport or tidal barrage) have not come to fruition, and its vast mudflats continue to host large numbers of wintering and passage waders, particularly the Dunlin which peak at over 50,000 on the estuary as a whole. The riverside grazing meadows near Slimbridge remain the winter home of both Bewick’s Swans and White-fronted Geese, although both have declined in numbers, primarily because more are remaining on the near continent rather than crossing to Britain. However, the habitat changes and improvements made by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge mean that there is certainly no shortage of birds to be seen, the numbers and variety of waders being especially notable, with Avocets and even a pair or two of Cranes having recently started to breed there.

At migration times, passerine movements along the estuary can be impressive, with a good sprinkling of rarities to be found, and storms continue to bring a wide variety of seabirds well upriver. At the mouth of the River Parrett, the coastal landscape has been totally transformed by the creation of the Steart Marshes reserve, also under the aegis of the WWT working alongside the Environment Agency. By realigning the sea wall, not only has the local flooding risk been alleviated, but the newly created series of wetlands, ranging from fresh marsh to tidal inlet, have already attracted a huge variety of birds, both in the breeding season and in winter.

The Army’s control of large parts of Salisbury Plain continues to ensure the survival of several downland areas that would doubtless otherwise now be under the plough, attracting wintering birds such as Hen Harrier, Merlin and

Short-eared Owl as well as several specialised breeding species. The most iconic of these is perhaps the Stone Curlew, numbers of which were reduced to as low as perhaps 20 pairs. However, work by the RSPB, together with the military and local landowners, has seen the population increase significantly, now well into treble figures, and although mostly on private land, they can be observed safely in at least one area.

The Plain is also the home of the Great Bustard reintroduction project, still in its early stages, and so far with uncertain results, as the birds have a tendency to wander widely after release and do not always return successfully. The scheme to bring back Cranes to the Somerset Levels seems to be crowned with rather more success, a few pairs already having laid eggs and produced young. Both species never fail to impress, even if strictly not yet 'tickable' by listing birders. The introduced Mandarin Duck, however, is firmly on the British List, and is well-established in several parts of Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, helping to reinforce Britain's position as a significant centre of the world population of this east Palearctic species, and so far it is felt to be a harmless addition to Britain's avifauna. Conversely, control measures to prevent hybridisation with the related European White-headed Duck have seen numbers of the North American Ruddy Duck reduced to just an occasional sighting in places where they were once found in their hundreds. This controversial policy has raised strong feelings on both sides of the argument.

Less contentious, though even then not entirely so, is the way in which most of the birds of prey have benefited from protection and from the reduced use of pesticides in agriculture. Buzzards have continued to push east, and are now a typical sight throughout the whole area, previously having been relatively sparse to the east of Bath. Peregrines have returned to nest in many urban as well as natural sites, some well known and even viewable remotely by webcam, while in winter, hunting birds can be expected over almost any wetland habitat. Sparrowhawks continue to maintain a healthy population, while Goshawk numbers have increased enough to allow viewpoints in the Forest of Dean to be set up where their spectacular spring displays can be seen. Red Kites have started breeding in Wiltshire, no doubt an offshoot of the introduced population of the Chilterns, and wandering birds are increasingly reported throughout the region, particularly in the spring. Hopefully it will only be a matter of time before more pairs settle down elsewhere.

Concerns are sometimes raised as to whether it is really a good idea to make available detailed information that might bring additional pressures to bear on already beleaguered populations of birds. Certainly there are some who are very 'protective' of their local patch, and would prefer that information is confined to a select few. In the case of vulnerable breeding birds, where numbers are very low or where the species is in the initial stages of establishing a new population, this is often well justified. But, looking back on the changes that have occurred over the years, it is clear that whatever minuses there have been, and there certainly have been quite a few, disturbance from birdwatchers has generally played a very minor part in bringing them about. Habitat loss and degradation, agricultural intensification, urbanisation and climate change have placed far greater stress on fragile bird populations than any number of rubber-necking birders peering at them. In truth, if it were not for the fact that many of the best places are already under some form of protection by conservation interests, or that pressure from the environmentally aware, including the

majority of birdwatchers, had been brought to bear, the losses would be far greater than they have actually been.

And on a more positive note, where species have increased in numbers and/or range, and there have been an encouraging number of these over the same period, the active interest of these same groups has ensured that significant populations have been established of several species that might otherwise have struggled to move beyond their initial toeholds. There is no doubt that in today's crowded world those who wish to continue to enjoy birds and the natural world in general cannot pretend that threats will go away of their own accord, and although there are obvious risks involved, the more people who realise that a particular site is important, the better will be the chance that it can be defended. It is imperative that we are not apologetic about our concern that a wildlife-rich countryside is a fully justifiable land use and that constant pressure is brought to bear on those whose actions make it otherwise. The most straightforward way of doing this is to join one of the conservation bodies such as the RSPB, the WWT, county Wildlife Trusts, etc., but also be prepared to be vocal in support of a specific site that might be under threat.

So, despite many losses among what were once common woodland and farmland passerines, there are still plenty of birds to be found, and some rewarding places to find them in. Some continue to be crowded, but some still remain little watched. One or two sites have received attention by assiduous 'patch workers', who have turned up some amazing finds, so there is still plenty of potential out there. Certainly many woodland and inland areas, for instance, are visited only infrequently by birdwatchers. If readers of this book get as much pleasure exploring the region as was involved in its writing and research, they will have much to look forward to.

USING THIS BOOK

THE REGION

The region covered in this fourth edition is the same as in the previous three, covering the three counties spelled out in the title, but also including the former county of 'Avon' which was replaced by the four unitary authorities of Bath & North-east Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. However, the word 'Avon' still appears quite frequently, not least because the name is still attached to both the Wildlife Trust and the Bird Report covering the area concerned, and its boundaries are still indicated on the Key to Sites map. The individual sites have been treated in what it is hoped is a logical geographical order, starting in the far south-west of Somerset and ending in the far south-east of Wiltshire. As in the previous edition, even the more minor sites have been integrated into the main listing, using an abbreviated form of the standard format, so that as far as possible all the sites that are physically close together also appear near each other in the text.

CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION

The basic criterion for a site's inclusion is that it either holds a wide variety of species, is notable for certain more specialised birds, or is a good accessible representative of its habitat type. Within these general constraints, details of as many places as space allows have been included, spread as evenly as possible over the region. Although there is no doubt that most of the region's birds could be found by concentrating on no more than half a dozen areas, there are many others that are certainly of interest to birdwatchers who live close by, and also some that appear in local reports, even occasionally hosting national rarities, but to which access details are not always well known.

By including such 'minor' sites, the hope is that the book will be useful to local birdwatchers as well as directing visitors from outside the area to the most productive places. This is not to say that there aren't plenty of other places where interesting observations can be made – the growth of 'patchwork', where someone selects his or her own 'patch' and studies it assiduously, has shown that almost anything can turn up almost anywhere! Vagrants, in particular, often seem to choose to land in spots that appear completely arbitrary and unpredictable, but at least some of the sites included in this book have proved to be more reliable on a regular basis.

MEASUREMENTS

Throughout the text, measurements have been given in those units most readily understood by British readers. Distances are normally stated in miles, followed by the metric equivalent in kilometres. Altitudes are given in metres, as on all modern OS maps. For surface areas the imperial measurement is followed by the metric one.

HABITAT

This section gives a brief description of the main features of the area, concentrating in particular on those that may affect the birds. Also included are details of notable flora and fauna likely to be easily visible to non-specialists, together with ownership or reserve status where appropriate.

SPECIES

This section usually starts with a brief statement of the area's most significant group of birds, going on to give a sample of the main species of interest, and what they are likely to be doing in different seasons. The text is usually arranged in roughly chronological order starting with winter and resident species and then moving through the year to help follow the pattern of bird events in different seasons. Some attempt has been made to give the scale of numbers to be expected – whether single birds, small parties or flocks of hundreds of a particular species. Rare migrants and vagrants are by their nature unpredictable, but examples from the recent past have been given as a rough indication of what might be expected. Common species are usually excluded unless they are of particular significance, e.g. prominent rookery, large numbers of roosting Starlings, etc. Specific dates are not usually included here as the Calendar section gives more detail on when each species usually occurs.

The treatment of rare and vulnerable breeding species is always a problem. There are some, like the Great White Egrets at Ham Wall, the Goshawks in the Forest of Dean, and Peregrines at various urban locations, where the sites are well known and the birds seemingly not under threat, at least not from birdwatchers. Some, like Firecrest and Red Kite, have happily increased in numbers enough that there is no longer a need to pretend that they are rarer than they really are, at least in their main strongholds. In general, the areas given are those where they are best looked for, although some are actually more widely distributed. Anyone who comes across a rare breeding bird in a new site should at least think carefully before mentioning it publicly. Species that are either nationally rare, or are more easily found out of the region, have been omitted or treated very vaguely – there are not very many of them, and their names will mostly be well known.

TIMING

Includes such things as tides, time of day, weather conditions, periods of particular disturbance, etc. likely to affect what is seen, irrespective of the time of year.

ACCESS

How to get there, starting from the nearest large town and main A-roads, hopefully with enough detail to locate using a satnav, but going on to give details of minor roads and paths, drawing attention to the most profitable parts of what may be quite an extensive area. For each of the main sites, use this section in conjunction with the outline maps, but for detailed exploration the 1:25,000 OS Explorer maps are invaluable, especially as they now cover the country in reasonably sized blocks; the numbers of the appropriate ones are given at the

head of each section. These are now available via smartphone apps, which may be more convenient in the field. In some places a grid reference has been given to pinpoint some of the more obscure spots.

At many reserves, detailed access maps are available, either on display panels or as leaflets and, where known, these have been indicated in the text. As almost everyone nowadays seems to have a compact camera or smartphone, it is often a good idea to take a quick photo of the display panel map as an aide-memoire, especially when exploring an extensive reserve. Wherever possible, public rights of way have been recommended and details given of restrictions on access at the time of writing, but nothing written here implies that parking or access can be taken for granted. In many places the exact status concerning access is not clear, and on private land the owner's permission should always be sought before deviating from public paths. The more formal car parks are indicated on some of the maps, with an indication, where possible, of whether a fee is payable. Other places where parking is usually feasible are suggested, but in the countryside parking space may be extremely limited, and should always take account of farm or forestry access and the safety of other road users. If in doubt, seek permission.

Although in many cases a car is the only practicable means of access for most people, details of public transport are given where this provides a reasonable alternative. Facilities for disabled or less mobile people are increasing all the time, and these have been indicated where known. Those leading parties of birdwatchers and those with special needs should contact reserve managers or the relevant controlling organisation in advance, even for those places where permits are not normally required. (For relevant addresses, see List of Organisations.) Many reserves and conservation organisations nowadays have associated websites and these are also useful sources of information. As web addresses seem to change frequently, only some of the more major ones are given here; search engines such as Google will generally locate up-to-date versions of these and other site-related addresses.

CALENDAR

A quick reference section, by season, that corresponds as far as possible to the main periods of avian activity. Within each section the most likely periods for each species or group of species is given; if no further qualifying comment is made, the bird concerned may be looked for with equal chance of success at any time during the season, or peaks may occur randomly throughout. The exact species mentioned are to a certain extent arbitrary, but hopefully include those that are more interesting or significant. In general, in richer habitats the commoner species are taken for granted unless there is good reason not to do so and this section should be used in conjunction with the species account.

1 EXMOOR

OS Explorer OL 9

Habitat

The Exmoor National Park covers an area of c.265 square miles (686km²), but the heartland is the smaller, although still extensive, area of high moorland, wooded hillsides and river valleys from Dunkery Beacon to Pinkworthy in the north to Winsford Hill and Withypool Common in the south. Ploughing and reseeded with grass and heavy burning of heather, both in the interests of sheep farming, have reduced the extent of moorland dominated by deep heather to the north-eastern part of the moor roughly from Dunkery through Wilmersham Common to Oareford. Similar but less varied habitat exists in the Withypool and Winsford areas. Dunkery Beacon reaches a height of 519 metres, commanding fine views in all directions, particularly of the Bristol Channel coast as far as Weston-super-Mare. The north-western part of the moor from Alderman's Barrow to Pinkworthy is nearly as high, but is dominated by moor-grass and is very waterlogged in places. The high ground is treeless, apart from a few clumps and lines of beeches, but the many streams draining in all directions shelter scattered rowans and hawthorns, these becoming more numerous lower down where they merge into the hedges of the farmland and larger woods of the lower parts of some of the river valleys. North of Dunkery, particularly around Horner Water, there are fine sessile oakwoods, and the fringes of the moor hold several conifer-dominated Forestry Commission and Crown Estate plantations. Bracken with some patches of gorse occurs widely in the river valleys and on the lower slopes of the moorland, providing valuable shelter for many breeding passerines. In some of the moorland valleys, remains of buildings and drystone walls are sometimes used as breeding sites by Wheatears, and rocky outcrops occur near several of the streams. Unlike the situation on Dartmoor there is only one reservoir, the small, 24 acre (9.7ha), Nutscale Reservoir.

Among mammals, Red Deer and Exmoor ponies are the most conspicuous, but there are plenty of Badgers and Red Foxes, plus a resurgent Otter population, although the chance of actually seeing one is very low. Adders can be found basking in sheltered places, while Heath Fritillaries are outstanding among a varied butterfly population. Although much of the area is in fact private land, there are plenty of waymarked footpaths and the whole area is popular with sightseers, walkers and horse riders at all times of the year.

Species

Exmoor is renowned for its variety of localised breeding birds; many of these are only present in the spring and summer, and are then replaced by a few specialised winter visitors. Of these, Hen Harriers occur regularly, one or two ranging widely over the high moorland, though they are most likely to be seen in the north-western part. The odd Short-eared Owl is sometimes reported, but they are not at all regular, despite what appears to be ideal habitat, apart from some years when there is an influx. However, Buzzards are resident in good numbers and both Merlin and Peregrine hunt over the uplands in winter. Red Kites have started to appear increasingly often, and can turn up at any time of year, although spring and early summer offer the best chance of seeing one.



Redstart

Birds from both the native Welsh population and from the reintroduction schemes elsewhere in the country are thought to be the most likely source, rather than immigrants from the continent. Small birds can seem scarce on the open ground, with most of the Meadow Pipits and almost all the Skylarks moving to lower ground, but a few Stonechats attempt to overwinter in the higher river valleys where they occur more commonly in the summer. There has been a scattering of Great Grey Shrike records in the autumn and winter, so it is always worth looking out for what can be a surprisingly elusive species. Ravens are widespread out of their breeding season which, like that of the resident Dippers down in the river valleys, starts early, the latter often being in full song before Christmas. With the trees bare, woodland birds can be easier to see, although total numbers of most species are lower at this time of year. Treecreepers, Nuthatches and the occasional Lesser Spotted Woodpecker join the roaming parties of tits, the Horner oak woods being one of the few places in Somerset where this last species can still be found, although recent records have become increasingly sparse.

It seems that both climate change and exceptional weather events have been playing a part in altering the mix of rarer breeding species on Exmoor. Sadly, Ring Ouzels have ceased to nest on Exmoor (last proved in 2002), although migrants are regularly seen in their old haunts in both spring and autumn. Neither Red nor Black Grouse have been seen here for many years, of course, and even the new arrival, Dartford Warbler, is currently at a very low ebb, following the severe winter of 2009/10. Prior to that there were up to a hundred or so singing males, some quite high up onto Dunkery Beacon, but the ice and snow then reduced them to a handful along the coast between Minehead and Bossington. However, they have started to reappear in several of their old haunts, and given a few more mild winters, they could well bounce back.

Most moorland birds prefer the relative shelter of the stream valleys, with Whinchat, Willow Warbler, Tree Pipit and Grasshopper Warbler occurring on bracken- and heather-covered slopes with scattered bushes. Cuckoos range widely when searching for victims to parasitise, their far-carrying calls still a reasonably frequent summer sound on Exmoor, but the numbers of Wheatears are currently at a low ebb, although regular on migration. A few Snipe can be

heard 'drumming' over the wetter areas, and may be helped by the Mires Project, which involves re-wetting some areas as a flood-prevention measure for sites further downstream. Curlew, on the other hand, have virtually disappeared as a breeding bird.

Exmoor has traditionally been known as a breeding site for Merlins, but they are now rarely seen in summer, and regrettably seem to be another lost breeder, although they still occur in winter. Hobbies also feed over the moor in spring and summer, and presumably breed in the general area. Passage migration as such is not outstanding, but flocks of up to 300 Golden Plover sometimes stop off on the high moors in both spring and autumn, and it's always worth checking for Dotterel on passage in late April/early May.

Lower down in the oak woodland, Pied Flycatchers, Wood Warblers and Redstarts are widely scattered, together with a good variety of commoner woodland breeding species. A few pairs of Siskins and Lesser Redpolls breed, the former in coniferous areas, the latter more associated with gorse and birches, with both species most easily located during their spring song flights. On warm summer evenings the distinctive churring of Nightjars can be heard along the woodland/heathland edges in several places. During late summer the woodland grows quiet as birds complete their breeding season and moult, but autumn can be quite rewarding with summer birds moving out into the heather, and migrant Ring Ouzels, sometimes in small parties, will stay for a few days to feed on the rowan and hawthorn berries.

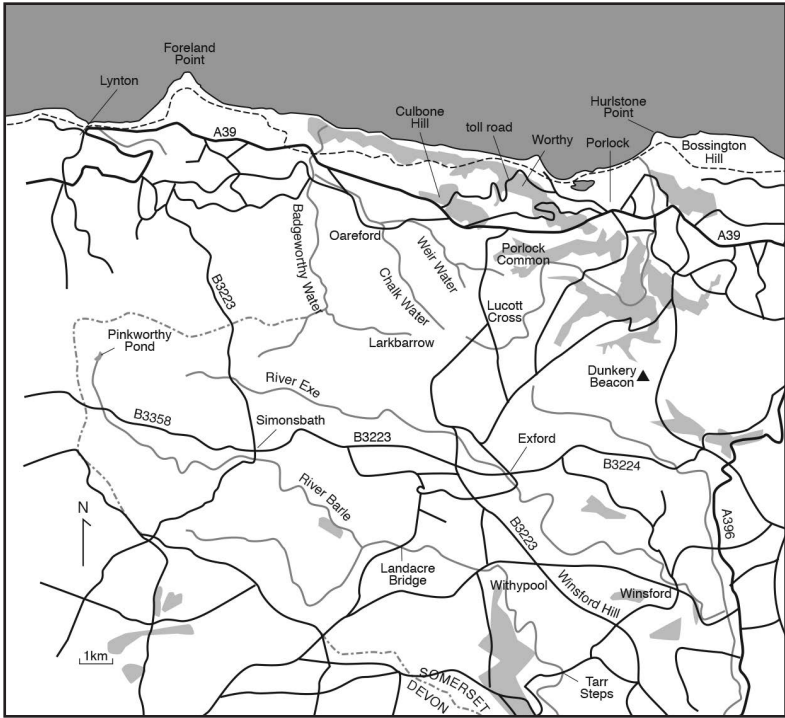
Apart from the streams there is little surface water, so waterbirds are few at all times of the year, although a few Goosanders have recently arrived as a breeding species, notably along the River Barle. Grey Herons can be seen singly at all times of the year, with small heronries near Withypool and Winsford. Nutscale Reservoir usually attracts only the occasional bathing gulls or Mallard, although Goosander and Canada Goose have been recorded.

Timing

At any time of year strong winds and rain make the moorland unpleasant and unrewarding for the watcher, and even the woodland birds will be subdued. For most breeding species morning visits are the most productive, and the more popular spots can become crowded with tourists on summer afternoons. Nightjars are best listened for late on warm summer evenings.

Access

The most productive area, and certainly the one for a first visit to Exmoor, is around Horner and Dunkery Beacon. Approaching Porlock on the A39 from the east, turn sharp left along a lane signposted to Horner, c.½ mile (0.8km) beyond the right-angled bend at Allerford and park in the village's pay and display car park (free for NT members). One productive circuit is to walk upstream by Horner Water, looking out for Dippers and Grey Wagtails right from the start. After c.1 mile (0.8km), fork left (signposted Cloutsham) and follow East Water upstream to where it crosses the road. Turning left up the road brings you to Webber's Post, where there is another car park. An easy-access track here is useful for the less mobile, and the bridleway next to it leads towards Horner, though you need to fork left off it along the Windsor Path to get back to the starting point. A minor road from Porlock to Wilmersham crosses the main Horner Water further west in the oak woodland, and provides another



point of access (see also map with next site). Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts are often easiest to see at the upper ends of the valleys, the latter in particular preferring the edges rather than the main woodland itself. Wood Warblers are rather more widespread throughout.

Webber's Post (SS903439) is reached by car by continuing up through Horner village and taking the first turning to the right at a minor crossroads. The road rises steeply through an area of beeches and a few conifers to reach a car park on the right where the road divides. This point provides an excellent site for scanning the woodland of the Horner valley, with soaring Buzzard and Sparrowhawk often to be seen. Taking the right fork (on foot is often best) brings you to the East Water stream as mentioned above, with Dipper, Pied Flycatcher and Redstart usually easily found. Directly east of Webber's Post, the lower slopes of Luccombe Hill hold breeding Grasshopper Warblers and Nightjars, both best listened for on summer evenings. This was also a good spot for Dartford Warblers when the population was at its peak, although they could then be found almost anywhere there was thick heather and extensive low gorse. Siskins can be heard singing over the adjacent conifers in the spring, and it's worth checking here for Crossbills, especially after one of their periodic irruptions.

The left fork continues over the flank of Dunkery Beacon, with several pull-in places and a larger car park at Dunkery Gate over the brow of the hill, all providing access to the heather moorland on either side of the road. The path past the cairn on the Beacon itself is not usually very productive although

Golden Plover and the odd Dotterel have occurred near the Robin How cairns just east of the road. Following the right fork at Webber's Post and crossing East Water (very narrow and winding like most of the roads where they cross the woodland streams) brings access to more heather-dominated moorland around Stoke Pero and Wilmersham Commons, where several obvious footpaths allow further exploration of the lower slopes of Dunkery on foot. This is possibly the best area to look for a migrant Ring Ouzel, both in spring and autumn, with Whinchats, Stonechats, Tree Pipits and Grasshopper Warblers all occurring in the sheltered valleys. The streams around Chetsford Water, which is crossed by the road running north to Porlock Common, are often productive. Nutscale Reservoir (SS861443) lies in this valley and can be viewed from its access track just off the minor road back to Porlock from Wilmersham Common.

For the western grass moorland, take the A39 west out of Porlock up the famous and extremely steep Porlock Hill, turning left in c.2 miles (3.2km) along a road signposted to Exford and then right in 2½ miles (4km) at Lucott Cross (alternatively approached from Chetsford Water). Park by a cattle grid across the road and take the public bridleway towards Malmsmead, passing the ruins of Larkbarrow Farm. The open nature of the landscape gives a good chance of seeing any hunting birds of prey that may be present, especially in winter. A few Wheatears are attracted by the stone walls, and the beech trees around and beyond the farm can hold breeding Redstarts. Various paths lead off across the surrounding moorland, although care should be taken in poor weather.

There are quite a few lesser-known areas worthy of exploration during a longer visit. Hawkcombe, which runs directly back from Porlock church, contains similar species to those of Horner Woods, including Pied Flycatcher, Redstart and Dipper, and Ley/Crawter Hills to the south have some nice gorse heathland with Stonechat, Yellowhammer, Lesser Redpoll and Nightjar. The whole area is easily accessible from Porlock.

Weir Water and Chalk Water near Oareford are attractive streams with Dipper and Whinchat in the valleys, and Wood Warblers and Redstarts in the nearby oak woodland. Park at Robber's Bridge car park (SS821465), where a short 'easy-access trail' provides an initial way into the valleys here. Lesser Redpolls, Siskins and Tree Pipits can be heard singing around the conifers on Culbone Hill, where the Worthy Toll Road from Porlock Weir emerges on the A39. The area can be scanned from the roadside, although the woods are private, with huge numbers of Pheasants and at least some Red-legged Partridges released in the autumn.

Pinkworthy Pond (SS723423) lies near the Devon border west of Simonsbath and is reached from the B3358 just before the county boundary. Park a short distance back from the bridge over the River Barle and follow this up to its source in the Pond itself beyond the Pinkery Centre for Outdoor Learning. The Macmillan Way long-distance footpath crosses some of the surrounding grass moorland which is extremely waterlogged but has attracted Golden Plover on migration. The Barle valley itself is an attractive stretch of farmland fringed with patches of heath and marsh and, although not outstanding for birds, a summer walk from Simonsbath past Cow Castle to the Landacre Bridge area should produce Dipper, Whinchat, Wheatear, Redstart and Buzzard, with the chance of a Ring Ouzel in autumn, while Sand Martins have bred here in the past. The bare grass and heather moorland of Withypool Common lies

immediately to the south of here, but Winsford Hill, to the east, is usually more productive, with a larger area of heather moor with scattered hawthorns and scrub attracting Tree Pipits and other open-ground breeding species, plus passing birds of prey in the winter. The oak-dominated woods upstream from Tarr Steps (SS868321) contain the usual woodland and river species including Pied Flycatcher and Dipper.

CALENDAR

All year: Grey Heron, Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, Merlin, woodpeckers including Lesser Spotted (scarce), Raven, Dipper, Stonechat (scarce in winter), Dartford Warbler (scarce), Nuthatch, Meadow Pipit, Grey Wagtail, Siskin.

December–February: Hen Harrier, Peregrine, occasional Red Kite or Short-eared Owl, Snipe, Woodcock.

March–May: Goosander (elusive breeder); Hen Harrier gone by early April; Red Kite on passage; Golden Plover pass April; Ring Ouzel pass and Stonechat return from late March; Chiffchaff and Wheatear return early April; Cuckoo, Redstart, Whinchat, Pied Flycatcher return late April; most migrants in by early May, but Spotted Flycatcher may not arrive until mid–late May; song at maximum May–June, when Siskin and

Lesser Redpoll easiest to locate in display flights.

June–July: Breeding species include Cuckoo, Nightjar, Sand Martin (erratic), Redstart, Whinchat, Wheatear, Grasshopper and Dartford Warblers (scarce), Whitethroat and other common warblers, Wood Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, Tree Pipit; song mostly fades in July, although Nightjar continues to August.

August–November: Majority of summer passerines leave by end of August; Redstart, Whinchat, Wheatear more widespread in low numbers in September; Ring Ouzels pass in September; winter raptors arrive from late October (wandering Peregrines throughout the year); perhaps Great Grey Shrike late October–November or on into the winter.

2 PORLOCK, HURLSTONE POINT & MINEHEAD

OS Explorer OL 9

Habitat

Most of the north-facing coast of this part of the Bristol Channel from Minehead west into Devon is steep and rocky, so the break formed where the low-lying and fertile Porlock Vale reaches the coast provides a focal point for migrants moving along the coast and the vale itself channels those moving in a north/south direction. A shingle bar runs the whole width of the bay, but in 1996 this was breached, thereby altering the habitat completely. Whereas Porlock Marsh was previously a series of shallow mud-fringed lagoons backed by a small reedbed and scattered trees, the area is now effectively a tidal inlet with patches of saltmarsh scattered in and around it and virtually all the trees have gone.

Immediately to the east the rocky promontory of Hurlstone Point, with its old coastguard lookout, rises steeply to 109 metres by way of grass-grown scree and rocks. Further east are the mostly inaccessible cliffs on the north side of the

Selworthy Beacon ridge, where there are some extensive stretches of gorse and heather, with the high ground stretching as far as Minehead. The attractive villages of Bossington and Allerford by the Horner Water river are sheltered by steep wooded slopes. More extensive woodland dominates the high ground rising towards Exmoor behind Porlock.

Species

Seawatching in winter has shown that Red-throated Divers are regular offshore, with numbers peaking around the turn of the year. The majority are only transient birds, but over 100 have been seen on occasion. The odd Black-throated Diver is also noted at the same time, although they too are often only just passing through. Common Scoter appear in the bay from time to time, but other sea duck are relatively rare. Cormorants can be seen at any time of year, but Shags are unusual, with just the odd juvenile sometimes appearing after the breeding season has ended. Winter gales may bring hundreds of Kittiwakes offshore, and they also appear on spring passage. These days Porlock Marsh is much less attractive to dabbling ducks, though up to 50 each of Teal and Mallard can sometimes be found in winter, joining the small numbers of Shelduck that can be seen throughout the year, while among the waders, a few Oystercatcher, Curlew and Lapwing are the most usual species here. The shingle and rough ground provide feeding opportunities for passerines, and the flocks of Linnets, Greenfinches and Chaffinches are always worth checking for rarer visitors. The occasional Snow Bunting stops off on the shore in autumn and winter, and Water Pipit has occurred from time to time.

Early spring sees the first Wheatears on the grass behind the shingle, with Sand Martins and Swallows not far behind, skimming along the shore or over the marsh. A little later, the usual Pied Wagtails are joined by up to 10 or so White Wagtails on their way to their Icelandic breeding grounds. A pair or two of Oystercatchers usually attempt to breed, but their success rate is very poor, and the Redshanks seem to have given up.

Although a few skuas, primarily Arctic, can be seen moving up-channel in spring, it is really with the coming of summer that Hurlstone Point comes into its own as a vantage point for observing passing seabirds. These are rarely numerous but feeding parties of Manx Shearwaters are regular, and on occasion over 1,000 birds have been seen in just a few hours' watching. Fulmars also appear from time to time, probably from the colony just to the west at Glenthorne on the Devon border, and have been seen prospecting the cliffs. Small numbers of Gannets also occur offshore in the summer, plus a few wandering Guillemots, Razorbills and the occasional Storm Petrel. By this time the cliff-nesting Ravens will have well-grown young, and the resident Rock Pipits are joined by two or three breeding pairs of Wheatears, with both species finding the rough scree-covered slopes ideal. Stonechats, Whitethroats and a few Yellowhammers occur nearby in the gorse and heather on the high ground to the east. At dusk, the evocative sound of churring Nightjars can sometimes be heard on North Hill, and the stretch of coastal gorse and heather from Porlock to Minehead is the area where Dartford Warblers still seem to be thriving, having weathered the severe winters rather better than they have up on nearby Exmoor. Peregrines, like the numerous Buzzards, can be seen here throughout the year.

Up to a dozen Little Egrets can be seen on the marsh at almost any time,

although late summer is when numbers usually peak. The small heronry on the marsh was flooded out after the breach occurred, but Grey Herons still nest nearby and come to the coast to feed. The changed habitat seems to have reduced the numbers of waders on passage, but it still attracts a few Curlews, Oystercatchers and Dunlin. Redstarts, Wheatears and Whinchats are regular passage birds, with perhaps a Black Redstart or Great Grey Shrike appearing late in the season. Visible migration, as elsewhere along the Severn Estuary, can be quite impressive in October, with larks, finches and buntings passing overhead early in the morning. Autumn gales may make seawatching from Hurlstone Point and Minehead worthwhile, as Storm Petrels, Manx Shearwaters or even one of the rarer shearwaters have been seen under such conditions. Small numbers of skuas, including Pomarine as well as Arctic, are seen most years, with Little Gulls and the occasional Sabine's if you are really lucky. Strong winds increase the chance of Guillemots and Razorbills being seen in the bay, although scanning the sea may produce sightings of birds offshore all year round.

Timing

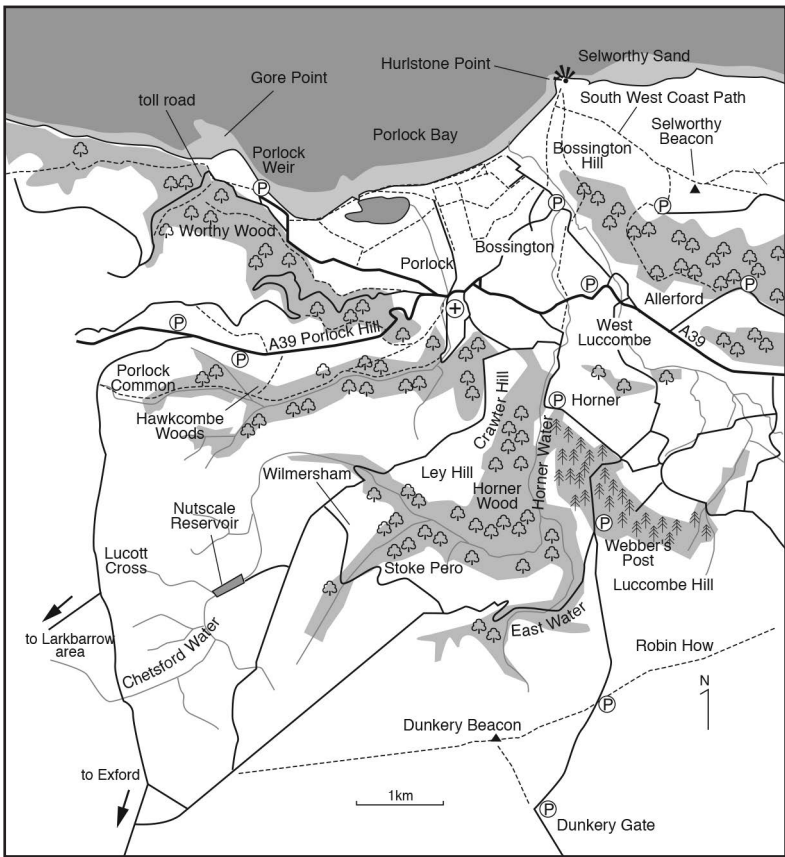
For grounded migrants around the marsh, early morning is best before there is too much disturbance. Stormy conditions are ideal for watching seabirds pushed close to the shore, particularly with westerly or north-westerly winds. There seems to be some evidence that mid-afternoon is a good time to watch for skuas passing offshore in autumn, with the birds having spent the day making the overland crossing from the North Sea.

Access

Porlock (accessible by bus from Minehead) is situated on the main A39 north coast road, which is often very busy at peak holiday times. From the town centre, Porlock Marsh can be reached on foot via Sparkhayes Lane, which leads directly onto a waymarked footpath. This passes through arable farmland to reach the back of the marsh. If not flooded, you can cross directly to the shingle bank, while well-signed permissive paths run in either direction to Porlock Weir to the left or Bossington Beach to the right, at the back of the saltmarsh itself.

Alternatively, drive along the B3225 to Porlock Weir where there is a pay and display car park just behind the beach. Walk a little way back along the road to where a flight of steps leads down onto the shingle, and then along the ridge to the breach. Do not neglect to scan the wooded ridge behind Porlock Weir for soaring Buzzards in spring and summer.

For Hurlstone Point and Bossington Beach, fork left at the east end of Porlock village along a narrow minor road signposted to Bossington, where there is a pay and display car park in the centre of the village (free to NT members) and some toilets. From here a footpath leads down to the beach, where the Horner Water percolates through the shingle. Particularly during migration periods, it is worth walking to the head of the tidal inlet and scanning the pools and rough ground that often attract parties of finches, buntings and other migrants. For Hurlstone Head, cross the river by the footbridge by the car park and turn left, following the stream (check for Dipper) and through some heathland to the point. For seabirds, scan from the shelter of the old lookout. Wheatears can be seen on the slopes directly below. A narrow and dangerous



path leads a little way further east for views of the first of the cliffs. A short way back from the point, another path runs up an open combe to Selworthy Beacon. Other footpaths lead on across the heathland further east, where Stonechats and Dartford Warblers occur, or down through the Allerford and Selworthy Woods to the starting point. Again, at migration times it is worth checking the bushy areas more carefully.

Selworthy Beacon can be reached by road, but only rather tortuously from the centre of Minehead, following signs to North Hill. The road runs the whole length of the hill, as does the coastal footpath, and there are several places to park. Greenaleigh Point, towards the eastern end of the ridge, is another seawatching lookout but a more convenient one can be found in Minehead itself (see map with site 4). From the town centre, follow 'The Esplanade' west along the seafront to where it ends at Quay West. A footpath continues along the shoreline, and the first shelter provides a good viewpoint for watching any seabirds driven into the bay in westerly gales. High tide visits are best, but not essential.

CALENDAR

All year: Pheasant, Cormorant, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Shelduck, Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, Kestrel, Peregrine, Oystercatcher, Raven, Dartford Warbler, Dipper (Bossington), Stonechat, Rock Pipit.

November–February: Red-throated Diver sporadically to April; occasional Black-throated Diver, Shag, Eider or Common Scoter; Teal, Merlin, Curlew, Kingfisher, maybe Snow Bunting; Kittiwake after gales.

March–May: Fulmar, Gannet; winter ducks leave during March; Oystercatcher may attempt to breed; Arctic and maybe rarer skuas passing offshore; Kittiwake flocks on passage; Wheatear from late March; White Wagtails in April.

June–July: Fulmar, Gannet; Manx Shearwater feeding parties; occasional

Storm Petrel, a few Guillemots and Razorbills, maybe Sandwich or Little Tern; breeding species include Nightjar, Dartford Warbler (Selworthy area), Whitethroat, Stonechat, Yellowhammer.

August–November: Seabirds during gales: Manx Shearwater, Gannet, perhaps Storm Petrel, even Sooty Shearwater or Sabine's Gull; Common and Arctic Terns plus a few Arctic Skuas passing August–September; Pomarine and Great Skuas occur erratically; trickle of passerines in August–early September including Redstart, Wheatear, Whinchat, plus hirundines; visible migration of pipits, larks and finches in late September–October; Black Redstart, sometimes Snow Bunting October–November.

3 DUNSTER FOREST & CROYDON HILL

OS Explorer OL 9

Habitat

The Crown Estate's Dunster Forest is an extensive area of mostly coniferous plantations of varying ages lying to the south and west of the historic village of Dunster, while immediately adjacent is the similar Forestry Commission land of Croydon Hill. In both areas there are several large forestry clearings as well as areas of unplanted land dominated by heather on Black Hill and Rodhuish Common. A similar but less extensive area of coniferous plantation and heathland lies across the River Avill valley in the Grabbist Hill/Hopcott/Wootton Commons complex, also part of the Crown Estate. The whole area affords fine panoramic views of the Brendon Hills to the south and Minehead and the Bristol Channel coast to the north. Roe and Fallow Deer occur in the woodlands, emerging to feed in the open at dawn and dusk.

Species

In winter the plantations can appear fairly birdless, although Goldcrest, Coal Tit and Treecreeper are resident. Parties of Lesser Redpolls and Siskins feed among the tops of the conifers and in some years Crossbills can also be found, either quietly feeding on cones or giving their distinctive chipping calls as they fly from one area to another. On fine days the numerous resident Buzzards and Sparrowhawks start their soaring display flights or the latter can be glimpsed skimming over at treetop height, and Ravens are often heard croaking



Nightjar

overhead. In early spring Chaffinches, Robins and various tits reappear around the clearings, and on sunny days flocks of Siskins may be heard in communal sub-song. A few pairs remain to nest, giving observers the chance to witness full song and display flights. Crossbills have also become more regular as a breeding species, particularly after 'irruption' years, although numbers have a tendency to decline until the next contingent arrives.

In late April and May other migrants appear, including a few pairs of Wood Warblers in the strips of beech that shelter the young conifers, with small numbers of Pied Flycatchers in the deciduous woodland around the river valleys, especially where nest boxes have been put up. Stonechats breed on the open heathland, where both Tree and Meadow Pipits can be heard singing, and a few Redstarts can be found along the edges of the woodland in places. From late spring the main speciality of the area, the Nightjar, appears, most usually located by its distinctive churring song given at dusk from the edges of the larger clearings. Eventually one will be seen gliding low over the young conifers or heather, sometimes clapping its wings in display or giving its low *cuik* flight call. The reeling song of Grasshopper Warblers is also to be heard in the half-light, but although the habitat looks ideal, Woodcock appear only to be elusive winter visitors.

Later in the summer there is less song but, particularly in the morning and evening, birds are active feeding young. In August dispersing summer visitors may appear all around the clearings, including a wider variety of species than those that actually breed locally. Migration has been little watched, but there is the chance of the odd Ring Ouzel dropping in on the higher open areas or a raptor circling over, before the wintering finches reappear again.

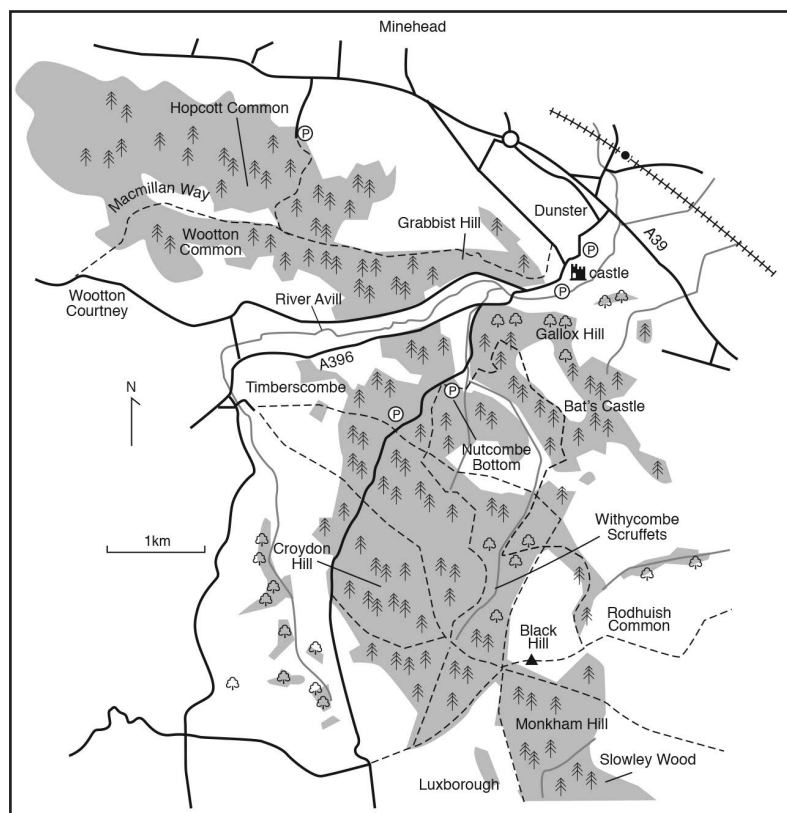
Timing

Mornings and evenings for small birds are best, particularly if the weather is calm. Nightjars do not normally start to call until the sun has set and calm warm conditions are essential for reasonable views; 21:30 is normally the earliest time, even later in midsummer. Soaring raptors such as Buzzard and Sparrowhawk prefer sunny conditions with at least a slight breeze to prompt them to undertake their display flights.

Access

Dunster lies on the Minehead to Porlock bus route, and the West Somerset Railway (mostly a summer service) also has a station serving the village and nearby Dunster Beach. From Dunster, take the A396 south-west for c.½ mile (0.8km) and turn left along a minor road signposted to Luxborough. The road winds steeply uphill through mixed woodland with various footpaths leading off east and west. There is a pay and display car park at Nutcombe Bottom (SS978423), on the left ½ mile (0.8km) from the main road junction, and from which start various waymarked trails through the surrounding woodland. The open ground of Gallox Hill and the Iron Age fort of Bat's Castle afford excellent views over the whole area, and it is possible to continue south to more open heathland around the triangulation point on Black Hill. The higher ground is normally the best for the heathland and conifer specialities, although Pied Flycatchers are more likely lower down in the deciduous woodland, such as in the Withycombe Scruffets valley, with Grey Wagtails and Dippers occurring near the streams. Stop and listen at the clearings for Nightjars, but do not forget to look up from time to time for raptors.

The road continues along the western edge of Croydon Hill and it is possible to park by the roadside in several places, taking care not to block any of the access roads that may be needed urgently in case of fire. More forestry tracks



lead south-eastwards through the woodland and forestry clearings as far as Monkham and Slowley Woods, where Pied Flycatchers also sometimes nest.

Another minor road runs west from the A396 along the south side of Grabbist Hill (park at the junction and walk up the steep path for access to heathland on the north slope). Other footpaths run up from near Wootton Courtney and a narrow road from the A39 on the north side of the hill leads to Higher Hopcott where there is a small car park (SS964447) and a board explaining access to this general area. The mix of habitat is similar to that on Croydon Hill, with several pairs of Nightjars regularly found here. The species is generally easiest to locate in large clearings up to five years after replanting; as this type of habitat is constantly changing with forestry operations, the exact locations will vary considerably over quite a short period.

CALENDAR

All year: Pheasant, Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, Kestrel, Tawny Owl, Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Jay, Raven, Dipper (River Avill), Stonechat, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Grey Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, Siskin.

December–February: Woodcock, Crossbill, Lesser Redpoll.

March–May: Siskin flocks in March, a few birds remaining to breed; Cuckoo, Tree Pipit, Blackcap, Redstart, Pied Flycatcher arrive mid-late April; Garden Warbler,

Whitethroat, Wood Warbler mainly early May; Nightjar from mid-late May; Lesser Redpoll.

June–July: Breeding species with song declining in July but Nightjars remaining vocal throughout; maybe Crossbill irruption in July.

August–November: Most migrants leave during August; dispersing Redstarts, Whinchat, maybe Ring Ouzel occur in September; winter finches from mid-October.

4 DUNSTER BEACH

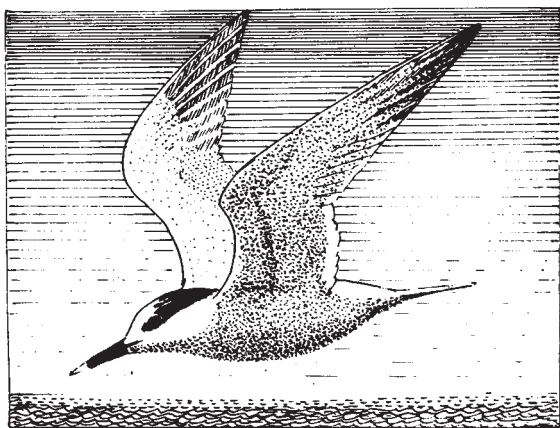
OS Explorer OL 9

Habitat

Stretching for c.4 miles (6.4km) east of Minehead, the shore here has extensive expanses of sand and rocks exposed at low tide, contrasting with steep cliffs to the west and mudflats further east. The beach is backed at the western end by Minehead golf course, backed in turn by mixed arable and cattle-grazed grassland. The railway to the south and the holiday village to the west keep casual disturbance here low. The private holiday chalet development of Dunster Beach itself fronts a long, narrow wetland strip called Dunster Hawn, with fairly open water at the eastern end, more overgrown with reeds and bushes to the west, and all surrounded by mature trees. The eastern rockier third of the beach to Blue Anchor is immediately backed by arable farmland. Minehead and Blue Anchor are both holiday resorts and the area is often crowded in July and August. It is less disturbed at other times of year, although very popular with dog walkers.

Species

Parties of Canada Geese can be found on Minehead marshes at any time of year, with numbers peaking in the low hundreds in late summer, and a few pairs breed. This flock regularly commutes between here and the Brendon Hills reservoirs of Clatworthy and Wimbleball, and is often accompanied by feral species which can include Barnacle Geese as well as other more obvious exotics. Truly wild geese are rare these days, apart from the Brent Geese, both Dark- and Light-bellied, which have become regular visitors in small numbers to the beach and shoreline in the autumn, less so in winter because of disturbance. Up to 200 Wigeon are the most numerous winter duck, with a few Teal and Mallard also feeding here, their numbers swelled if and when flooding occurs. As elsewhere along the Somerset coast, Little Egrets can be seen stalking the shore and rock pools at any time of year, although numbers tend to peak in winter, creeping into double figures. Among the waders, 150 or so wintering Curlew, Oystercatcher and Dunlin are the most numerous species, joined by flocks of several hundred Golden Plover in some years. Smaller numbers of Ringed Plover, Turnstone and Sanderling plus the odd Grey Plover and Knot add variety to the winter scene. The beach sometimes hosts a small winter gull roost, with Herring, Black-headed and Common Gulls being the most numerous species. Up to a dozen Mediterranean Gulls have been recorded in winter, though they are more reliably seen on autumn passage, and they tend to favour the Blue Anchor end of the bay. Offshore, gales at this time may drive large numbers of Kittiwakes up-channel. Peregrines patrol the coastline regularly in winter, with Merlin and Hen Harrier less frequent. The upper beach sometimes attracts wintering Snow Buntings, although, as everywhere on this coast, occurrences are patchy and in small numbers. Black Redstarts can also be found, although they are most likely in late autumn or on spring passage. The sheltered nature of the Dunster Haven allows a small number of Chiffchaffs to attempt to overwinter, along with the now resident Cetti's Warblers, and they have been joined in several years by the occasional Firecrest. Kingfishers and Water Rails are regular winter visitors, both often only detected by their calls, and Siskins and Lesser Redpolls feed among the alder cones.



Sandwich Tern

Whether or not the first Chiffchaffs heard in March are wintering birds or migrants, there is little doubt about the Wheatears on the golf course or the Sand Martins over the beach. Migrating warblers can be numerous in the woodland, with Whinchats and Redstarts occurring in the more open areas. Pied Flycatchers have also occurred in several springs. On the shore, small numbers of Whimbrel move through on their way north, sometimes accompanied by one or two Bar-tailed Godwits, never a common species on this coast. White Wagtails in their smart grey and white plumage feed in small groups along the upper shore and on the golf course. Among spring rarities, both Isabelline and Woodchat Shrikes have occurred in the past.

Breeding birds are not particularly notable, although the reeds at the Hawn hold a few pairs of Reed Warblers, and Cetti's Warblers have raised young on more than one occasion. Sandwich Terns may appear offshore during the summer, but terns are more regular in the autumn when Common and Arctic Terns also appear, with up to a dozen or so to be seen resting on the sands at low tide. Wader numbers increase again, with up to 100 Ringed Plover sometimes recorded on passage. Small numbers of Sanderling also peak at the same time, though they can be found almost all year round at this site. Freshwater species are not common, although Greenshanks can occur by the shore pools. Autumn passerines trickle through, and it is always worth checking the Hawn woodland for Firecrest and rarer migrants, but late autumn with visible movement of larks and finches is more reliable for numbers of birds, with flocks of Linnets, Greenfinches and Goldfinches stopping to feed along the upper shore.

Timing

For waders, high tide visits are best as the birds are nearer and also more active as the waters begin to fall. However, with a telescope, birds are still reasonably visible even several hours after high water, and it is possible to walk down the beach for closer views. In the main holiday months the whole area can become very crowded, and early morning visits are much more productive.

Access

Dunster Beach is signposted off the main A39 near Dunster. Drive through the village of Marsh Street and turn right down Sea Lane, over the automatic level crossing to a pay and display car park by the beach. A public right of way leads along the beach past the holiday chalet village to the golf course; at busy times a certain amount of tact is required of binocular-toting birdwatchers! Although the site is basically private, access is normally allowed to the nature reserve area, the wetland that extends behind the chalets. Near the entrance to the holiday village, a stone causeway crosses the eastern end of the Hawn, where there is the largest section of open water, and leads to a nature trail running through the woodland at the back, recrossing the more overgrown end about halfway along or towards the far end. Other paths allow the western section to be explored, with the whole area being attractive to migrants, especially since much of the golf course is now rather barren. The fields inland, which sometimes flood in winter and thus attract more wildfowl, can be scanned from the footpath that runs back to Dunster station from the bridge over the small stream (the old River Avill) at the far western end of Dunster Hawn. There is a large rookery here and birds often fly down to feed on the beach with Carrion Crows and

