

GOING FOR A SONG



Pied Flycatcher near Dartmeet
PHOTOGRAPH © BRYAN MOBLEY



Rebecca Mansell has had stories and articles published in a variety of magazines. She writes educational resources for colleges all over the country and is a qualified teacher of law and psychology. She loves Tavistock and particularly the moors where her two Springer spaniels keep her active by taking her for a walk...

You don't have to wear an anorak to be a birdwatcher, you know.

You needn't own a top of the range pair of binoculars to be able to tell your Peewit from your Green Plover (even though they are the same) or sketch accurate, artistic images of your sightings onto your notepad using the pencil hanging round your neck. It isn't necessary to babble on about which is really the smallest bird in Britain (the Firecrest, though some say the Goldcrest) to any poor soul who will listen. Just using your senses well is sufficient, feeling a little bit of wonder when you spot the notorious Dartmoor Buzzard is also good and realising that occasionally you actually may have to wear an anorak; particularly when it rains, is just plain sensible.

You already know that Dartmoor National Park is bursting with legend and intriguing history but were you aware that it is also a magical paradise for spotting an intriguing variety of birds? The sweeping hills with

nestling granite tors and the moorland wilderness offers the opportunity for sighting flourishing bird populations as well as the more endangered species over its 368 square miles of moorland, woodland, reservoirs and farmland. Lonesome ruins, bogs and rolling valleys contribute to this beautiful rugged landscape while increasing your chances of glimpsing a wandering Hen Harrier or sighting the elusive Ring Ouzle.

Many birdwatchers declare that there is nothing more satisfying than spotting a Golden Plover for the first time or hearing the plaintive cry of the Curlew or distinguishing a Rock Pipit from a Meadow Pipit but birdwatching is free therapy and a form of escapism too. What can be more relaxing than traipsing the moors while being at one with nature and getting the unique chance to visit the bird haven that is Dartmoor? Apart from benefiting from lashings of vitamin D from the



PHOTOGRAPH © PETE WALKDEN

Hen Harrier hunting near the Warren House Inn in winter



PHOTOGRAPH © PHIL NEWARD

Lapwing seen near Bonehill rocks

sun, birdwatching is a great way to maintain fitness as you climb the hills and explore the tors.

There are millions of birdwatchers all over the world but don't be put off by the clichéd image of a 'twitcher' who obsessively races all over the country with hundreds of others to spot a rare bird; you can enjoy birdwatching on whatever level you wish. Bill Oddie, an expert birding celebrity, says that he has met a broad spectrum of all types of people who enjoy birdwatching from millionaire businessmen to clergy, punks to footballers. So when your heart leaps because you've identified a Stonechat or a Linnet, be warmly welcomed into the enchanting world of birds. You won't want to leave.

Fancy sneaking onto the moor about an hour before sunrise with just a flicker of light in the sky? Okay, so perhaps you hadn't envisaged indulging in a spot of birdwatching quite so early but if you want the chance to be surrounded by a world infused with beautiful birdsong along with the opportunity of a being a spectator to songbird activity, then visiting Dartmoor before sun-up

is a special experience to write in your diary. A world without bird song would be a sad and silent world indeed and the dawn chorus in spring and summer is the best example of birdsong you will ever hope to hear. It is also common knowledge amongst experienced birdwatchers that you are far more likely to observe more birds at the start of the day than, say, the afternoon.

A fine, clear day with little wind between April and July would be best but still wrap up warm as it can be nippy so early in the morning. Pick a favourite spot on Dartmoor and remain there and get ready for a gradual build up to a symphony of song by mid morning. At first, one or two birds sing and then more join in.

As it is only the male birds singing, their burst of melody is to show ownership of a territory as well as to demonstrate their considerable health and vitality to sing so intensely which attracts females and then they must also defend their patch against other males. Listen out for and eventually hopefully see Song Thrush, Willow Warblers, Bullfinch, Lesser Redpoll and Great Spotted Woodpecker to

name just a few. Local bird expert and professional tour guide Phil Page (Dartmoor Nature Tours) tells me that from mid May onwards the Nightjar can be heard 'churring' at places such as Trendlebere Down and Fernworthy Reservoir.

As you take pleasure in the breathtaking beauty of Dartmoor, consider exploring woodland areas

to observe the Pied Flycatcher and the Wood Warbler, areas of gorse for the Linnet and the grassland for Wheatears. Birds of prey such as the Peregrine Falcon, Hobby and Kestrel have all been sighted on Dartmoor and don't forget boggy areas for Snipe with the male's eerie "drumming" display in the early mornings. ■

TIPS ON IDENTIFYING A BIRD

Look intently at a bird and take it in...

Ask yourself questions to maintain a mental picture such as; how big is it? What other bird does it look like? What colours does it have? What shape is it? Where is it? Month of year?

This will help you to acquire accurate visual recall to look it up in your well thumbed bird book!

THE IMPORTANCE OF HELPING NESTING BIRDS (THE BIRD CODE)

The bird breeding season is from the beginning of March to the end of July. Birds can be forced to leave their nests if they are disturbed with fatal consequences so always keep your dog on a lead, try to keep to tracks and paths if you can and avoid young birds on the ground. Remember, the birds interests must always come first.



PHOTOGRAPH © PHILIPPE BOISSEL

Skylark

Always remember...to raise your binoculars to your eyes when you see a bird; not to look down at your binoculars as you could miss a valuable sighting. When you are out roaming the moors, be silent and avoid sudden movement. The more camouflaged you are with the environment the better and do use your ears as well as your eyes; you will see much more if you listen for bird calls and songs, and movements too in trees or bushes. With this in mind, also look out for activities around you as our eyes are instantly attracted to moving birds and also scan the sky constantly as well as scrutinise different levels and distances.

And finally; any walk across Dartmoor can be as short or as long as you wish and involve as much hiking as you desire. Just keep your eyes and ears open and you are bound to spot a bird of your Dartmoor dreams...

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO WATCHING BIRDS

When you are roaming around Dartmoor, equipped with your binoculars and bird guide and little sketch pad, think about what kind of bird would like this habitat. Search the woodland areas for Tits, Nuthatches, Woodpeckers and Flycatchers, the hedgerows for Whitethroats, Blackbirds and Song Thrushes and the moor for Golden Plover, Grouse and Snipe. Woodland areas reveal an exuberant dawn chorus to listen to.

Remember, move slowly and quietly when bird spotting and be prepared for a really memorable day out on Dartmoor.

BIRDS YOU ARE LIKELY TO SEE...

Ring Ouzel, Redstart, Wheatear, Whinchat, Pied and Spotted Flycatcher, Wood Warbler in woodlands and open moorland, Gooseander on the River Dart

BIRDS YOU ARE LIKELY TO HEAR...

Grasshopper Warbler, Stonechat Cuckoo. In the evenings at Believer Forset - Nightjar and Woodcock, Tawny Owl and out early on the moor - Snipe "drumming with dead mens bones" spooky!

RARITIES...

Black-throated Thrush, Black Stork, Iberian Chiffchaff, Black Kite, Montagu's Harrier, Common Crane, Dotterel, Stone Curlew, Golden Oriole, Wryneck, Hoopoe, Yellow-browed Warbler, Common Rosefinch and Snow Bunting.

Advised by Steve Waite, Devon County Bird Recorder for the DBWPS (Devon Birdwatching and Preservation Society).

MORE INFO

Helpful Dartmoor courses, websites and clubs:

www.rspb.org.uk/
The Devon Bird Watching & Preservation Society (DBWPS)
www.devonbirds.org
www.legendarydartmoor.co.uk
www.dartmoornaturetours.co.uk

Favourite books

Bill Oddie's *Introduction to Birdwatching*

How to Birdwatch by Stephen Moss

How to be a bad birdwatcher by Simon Barnes

PHOTOGRAPH © IAN TRAYNOR



Golden Plover

WET VALLEYS	Lesser Redpolls, Grasshopper Warbler
MOORLAND AREAS WITH SCRUB	Yellowhammer, Whinchat, Whitethroat, Cuckoo
GORSE	Stonechat, Linnet, Dunnock
STREAMS, RIVERS	Grey Wagtail, Dipper, Goosander
GRASSY MOORLAND	Meadow Pipits, Skylarks
EVERYWHERE	Ravens, Buzzards

The weather on Dartmoor can be unpredictable, even in the summer, so consider in advance what to wear on your birding expedition. Layers of dark coloured t-shirts are a good idea, anything easy to tie around your waist as well as waterproofs and comfortable boots.

Remember a water bottle/flask as well as a camera and/or binoculars if you have them. A map of Dartmoor and a small bird guide and a little hardbacked notebook and pen/pencil are ideal but you don't want to be reading or writing too much and miss an unexpected bird. If you do get a chance though, you may wish to sketch a bird quickly and add a couple of notes (see below). It doesn't have to be a work of art, just enough to be able to look the bird up later.

You could be very lucky to spot a Barn Owl hastily searching for his breakfast or hear the cry of the Dartmoor Buzzard in no time at all; see a Stonechat or a Meadow Pipit before you have even glanced at your watch to note the hour. It isn't the amount of time you have for this birding encounter that is important but how you use it; simple strategies on how to see birds and using your alert senses is all you need to know!

DARTMOOR BIRDING LOCATIONS

- Dart Valley Woods
- Hound Tor to Haytor
- Challacombe Farm and Valley
- East Dartmoor National Nature Reserve

www.dartmoornaturetours.co.uk

Why not discover Dartmoor's wildlife with a professional Nature Guide? Phil Page has been leading guided walks on Dartmoor since 1986. Phil has appeared on many Radio and TV programmes and has published and featured in articles on Dartmoor in several newspapers and magazines (The Times, Bird Watching, Dartmoor Magazine).