

THE BIRDS OF THE BRECKS

WHERE TO WATCH BIRDS IN THE BRECKS

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1 CAVENHAM HEATH National Nature Reserve

English Nature
Fine example of ancient Breck heath, with wheatear, nightjar and stone curlew. Public access to the reserve south of the track. Parking at Temple Bridge, Icklingham. Tel: 01284-762 218.

2 COCKLEY CLEY LAKE

Cockley Cley Estate
Nature trail through grazing meadows around lake breeding lapwing, little grebe, snipe. Bird hide. Car park and partial disabled access. Access via 'Iceni Village'. Open April to October; entry charge. Tel: 01760-724 588.

3 EAST WRETHAM HEATH nature reserve

Norfolk Wildlife Trust
Large area of grass heath with pine woodland and meres. Wide range birds can be seen from nature trails and hide. Entrance and car park signposted off A1075. Reserve open daily 8am to dusk. Tel: 01603-625 540.

4 WEETING HEATH National Nature Reserve

Norfolk Wildlife Trust
Fine example of rabbit-grazed Breck heath. Stone curlew a speciality, as well as woodlark, lapwing, little owl. Reserve open April - September only, 7 am to 7pm; visitor centre (April to August). Small entrance fee (free to NWT members). Signposted off minor road between Weeting and Hockwold. Tel: 01603-625 540.

5 LACKFORD LAKES

Suffolk Wildlife Trust
Restored gravel pits attracting wide range of birds, especially wildfowl. Bird hides. Open daily. Access from A1101 between Lackford and Flempton. Tel: 01473-890 089.

6 LYNFORD ARBORETUM

Forest Enterprise
Arboretum, lakes, meadows and woodland. Hawfinch, firecrest, crossbill, siskin. Waymarked trails (including one suitable for wheelchairs) round lakes and old landscape gardens. Tel: 01842-810 271.

7 SANTON DOWNHAM

Forest Enterprise
Part of Forest Nature Reserve in Little Ouse river valley. Mosaic of habitats. Woodlark, nightjar, tree pipit, crossbill, kingfisher, water rail. Parking near railway crossing north of Santon Downham or St Helen's picnic site. Access via Little Ouse Path or Santon Street. Waymarked trails, mostly unsuitable for wheelchairs. Tel: 01842-810 271.

8 NUNNERY LAKES

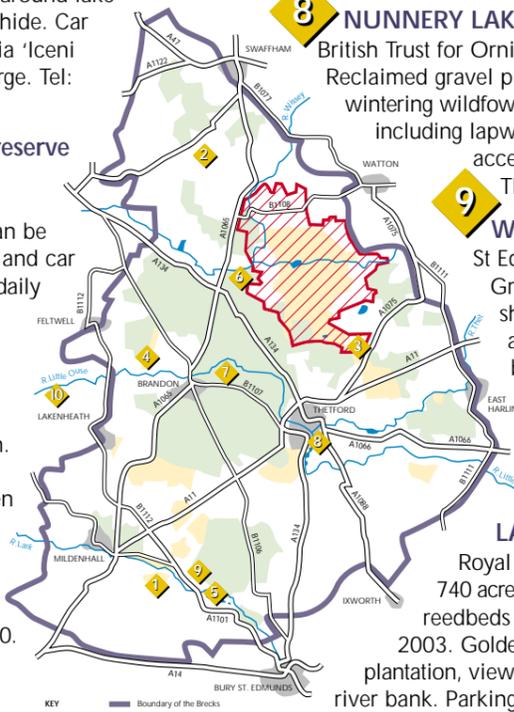
British Trust for Ornithology
Reclaimed gravel pits, alder carr and grass heath; wintering wildfowl; 70 breeding bird species including lapwing and kingfisher. Car park access upstream of Nuns Bridges, Thetford. Tel: 01842-750 050.

9 WEST STOW COUNTRY PARK

St Edmundsbury Borough Council
Grass heath maintained by grazing sheep, birch and oak woodland, alder carr, reclaimed gravel pit beside River Lark. Nature trail and bird hide. Open daily 10 am to 5pm. Access from A1101 via minor road. Tel: 01284-728 718.

LAKENHEATH FEN

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
740 acres / 300 ha of marshland with reedbeds being recreated on this site by 2003. Golden Oriole nesting in popular plantation, viewable from public footpath on river bank. Parking for access between river bridge and Lakenheath Station on B1112. Tel: 01603 660 066.



Find out more about the natural and cultural heritage of the Brecks with leaflets and booklets published by the Brecks Countryside Project.

Contact local Tourist Information Centres, or Ancient House Museum, Thetford; or visit the Brecks website

www.brecks.org



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The Brecks

BIRDS IN THE BRECKS

The Brecks is a unique region of diverse habitats which support an impressive cross-section of British birds, offering exciting opportunities for the keen enthusiast. Ideally located in the heart of East Anglia, it is a regular and convenient stopping-off place for the many bird-watchers who visit the North Norfolk and Suffolk coasts all through the year.

ABOUT THE BRECKS



The Brecks is 370 square miles/940km² of countryside in Norfolk and Suffolk

The Brecks is one of the great natural areas of Britain. It is a place of strange beauty and hidden stories which go back to the Stone Age.

Ancient heathland once covered huge areas of the Brecks, created by the axes of prehistoric farmers and the nibbling teeth of sheep

and rabbits. 'Breck' were temporary fields cultivated for a few years and then allowed to revert to heath once the soil became exhausted. Sand storms were once a regular occurrence, such as the one which engulfed the village of Santon Downham in 1668. Through many centuries the heaths, and the mysterious, fluctuating Breckland lakes known as meres, became home to a distinctive range of plants and animals.



© Graham King

Over the last hundred years the ancient character of the Brecks has been changed forever. The large-scale pine plantations of Thetford Forest and the use of modern

farming technology have transformed much of it into more productive land. The remaining stretches, and the more open parts of the forest, are now vital areas for wildlife conservation. The Brecks is an ideal area for quiet recreation, and the forests now welcome over 1½ million visitors each year.

HEATHLAND

Several different heathland types occur in the Brecks. Heather, lichens and mosses dominate on acid soils, to be replaced on alkaline sites by chalk grassland. Traditional short rabbit-grazed breck with characteristic unstable areas of blown sand still occur in a few places, and with scattered clumps and lines of ancient scots pines make up the unique landscape for which the Brecks is famous. Today's heaths, though, are really only remnants of the once vast tracts that existed prior to afforestation, intensive agriculture and increased urban pressure.

WHEATEAR

Colourful in appearance and attractive in behaviour, the Wheatear's association with rabbit-grazed breck is well known. Sadly however it is declining and is now mostly seen on passage in spring and autumn.



STONECHAT

Stonechats are scarce in the Brecks but can sometimes be found on certain heaths and also in young forestry plantations. Always very active birds, they perch on tops of bushes constantly flicking their wings and tail. Look for the distinctive black head, white collar and chestnut underparts of the male. The female is drabber and much less conspicuous.

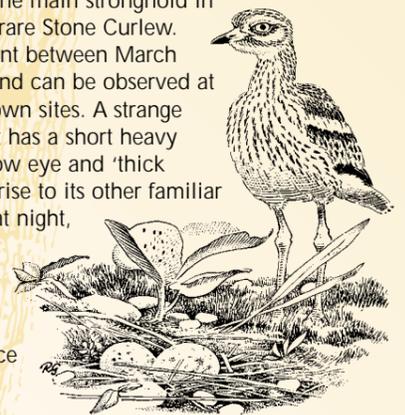


STOCK DOVE

The Stock Dove is smaller and darker than the Wood Pigeon, with two short black wing bars and no white on the wings or neck. Although found in a variety of habitats, they are familiar birds of the heathland where they find rabbit burrows attractive nest sites.

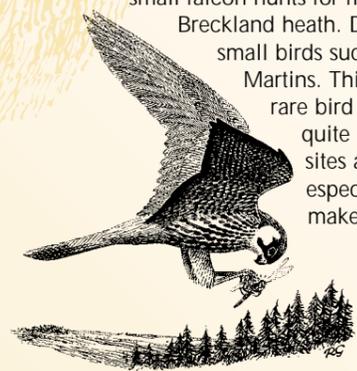
STONE CURLEW

The Brecks is the main stronghold in Britain for the rare Stone Curlew. They are present between March and October and can be observed at a few well known sites. A strange looking bird, it has a short heavy bill, large yellow eye and 'thick knees', giving rise to its other familiar name. Active at night, its strange wailing call heard from a lonely heath is the very essence of the Brecks landscape.



HOBBY

With sickle shaped wings resembling a large swift, a small falcon hunts for flying insects at dusk over a Breckland heath. During the day it preys on small birds such as Swallows and Martins. This is the Hobby, once a rare bird but happily nowadays quite common. Its favourite nest sites are clumps of trees, especially pines, where it makes use of old crows nests.



FOREST AND WOODLAND

CONIFEROUS WOODLAND

Thetford Forest Park, managed by Forest Enterprise, is Britain's largest lowland pine forest and covers one fifth of the Brecks. Clear felling and re-planting over the last three decades has resulted in an interesting uneven-aged forest structure, each stage having its own special bird communities.

BROADLEAVED WOODLAND

The Brecks also has some fine areas of broadleaved woodland, mainly oak, beech, sycamore and birch which support good songbird populations.

GOLDEN PHEASANT

Thetford Forest has the largest self-supporting Golden Pheasant population in Britain. Despite their bright colours they can be hard to see, spending most of their time in dense cover and venturing out in the open at quieter times such as early morning or evening.



WOODLARK

Woodlarks are found on clear-felled areas in the forest as well as on some heaths. It is quite different from the Skylark, with distinctive rounded wings, a very short tail and a beautifully musical song uttered mainly in flight. It is in fact considered to be one of our best songsters. March and April are the best times to see them before their breeding season really gets under way.



NIGHTJAR

Nightjars are another species that are doing well on forest clear-fells. They are nocturnal birds active mainly at dusk and dawn from mid-May to the end of August. Their churring song is unmistakable, and their display is extraordinary with the white wing and tail patches of the males standing out clearly in the half-light.



REDSTART

The male Redstart is one of our most colourful birds. It frequents all types of woodland but has a preference for areas where holes in old trees provide ideal nesting sites. The song is usually uttered from the highest tree-top, is not very loud and can be quite difficult to pick up.



WOODCOCK

Woodcock are another species that are best seen at dusk in spring and summer 'roding' along open plantation edges. Their long straight bills, rounded wings and croaking call are unmistakable.

CROSSBILL

Crossbill numbers depend on periodic invasions from the continent, and in some years they are very common in Thetford Forest. They breed very early, and the brick red males can be heard singing in mid-winter in the tops of pine trees, their heavy bills distinctive in silhouette. Quite large groups often fly over the forest giving sharp, single call-notes. Because their staple diet is conifer seed they are thirsty birds, and can often be seen drinking at puddles or at garden ponds.



GOSHAWK

The Goshawk is a rare bird but a few pairs are resident in the Brecks, mainly in Thetford Forest. They are mostly very secretive and difficult to see except perhaps in the early spring, when their large size and soaring display flights can sometimes give them away.

HAWFINCH

The heavy build, massive bill and bold white wing bars readily identify the Hawfinch, that is providing you can see it in the first place). They are very secretive birds and are best looked for in winter and spring before leaf growth occurs. Fortunately Hawfinches sometimes perch high in the tops of trees and 'tic' loudly, a note they also give in flight.



NIGHTINGALE

The Nightingale is a summer visitor arriving in late April, and frequents a wide variety of woodland and fen habitats where shrubby understoreys are present. Its superb song can be heard during the day but is best listened to at night when most other birds are silent. Actually seeing a Nightingale can be difficult as its drab colouration gives it effective camouflage in its woodland setting.



SISKIN

The Siskin is a tiny finch and a species of mature coniferous forest. It was formerly known mainly as a winter visitor but now breeds in the Brecks, attracted by the increase in conifers. Look for the distinctive transparent 'window' in the wing as they pass overhead uttering their 'tsee-tsee' flight calls. In winter Siskins often visit garden bird tables for peanuts - even in towns.



FARMLAND

Farmland is the largest land component in the Brecks, occupying three-fifths of the total area. Mostly cereal crops and sugar beet, it is generally not as bird-rich as other habitats, but provides vital breeding areas for Stone Curlews. Three-fifths of the Brecks population nests on farmland.

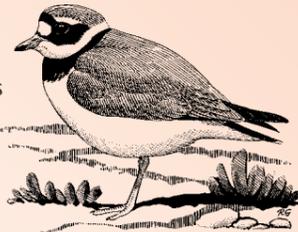
CORN BUNTING

Nicknamed the 'fat old bird of the corn', the Corn Bunting is heavily built and rather drab in appearance. Irregular and unreliable in its distribution, it is usually seen perched on a post or telegraph wires giving its jingling song likened to a rattling bunch of keys.



RINGED PLOVER

Inland breeding Ringed Plovers are not common, but the Brecks is one place where they do! A few pairs only, they utilise stony fields which obviously are good substitutes for shingle beaches.



WETLAND

(RIVERS, FENS AND MERES)

Four rivers meander serenely through the Brecks: the Thet, Wissey, Little Ouse and Lark. Their valleys contain a fascinating mosaic of riverine habitats. Poplar plantations with lots of dead timber lie next to cattle-grazed meadows; alder carr merges into thickets of willow scrub to form primeval fen interspersed with ancient dykes and long-established reedbeds. Much of this is true wilderness, rich in bird-life. So too are the meres, natural lakes with unusually fluctuating water levels.

LESSER-SPOTTED WOODPECKER

The Lesser-spotted Woodpecker is only the size of a Sparrow and consequently can be quite elusive. It likes areas with lots of dead timber especially along river valleys. The extremely rapid 'drumming' and loud repetitive call are heard in these habitats in late winter and throughout the spring and early summer.



KINGFISHER

Perhaps Britain's most exotic-looking bird, the Kingfisher is reasonably common along all Breckland rivers. Look for a brilliant blue flash as it comes off a perch and flies away low and rapid over the water. Better still, watch it fishing from that perch!



GOLDEN ORIOLE

The black and yellow plumage of the male Golden Oriole is a perfect camouflage amongst the dappled foliage of its fenland poplar habitat. A few pairs of this very rare bird breed on the western fringes of the Brecks, and it is sometimes possible to observe them at a certain site.



SNIPE

Although not as common as they were, Snipe can still be found on some of the water meadows and meres of Breckland. A small brown wader with a long straight bill, it is mostly seen in the air and is easily identified by the characteristic zigzag flight and harsh rasping call. During their display flights Snipe dive with their outer tail feathers widely spread, producing an unusual vibrating sound known as 'drumming'.



GRASSHOPPER WARBLER

A typical wetland species, the Grasshopper Warbler is thinly scattered in suitable habitats throughout the Brecks. Secretive and shy, its unusual mechanical song can be compared to the winding of an angler's reel and may be heard both during the day and at night.

LAPWING

The Lapwing is also known as the Peewit or Green Plover. The first name is taken from its erratic flight with slow flapping wing beats. Peewit is derived from its call, and Green Plover from its iridescent greenish-black and white plumage. Typical of farmland areas, the Lapwings' headlong plunges during their aerobic display flights are one of the first heralds of spring.



TREE SPARROW

The Tree Sparrow used to be a common bird but sadly nowadays it is declining. However it can still be found in a few places, especially around derelict farm buildings. Much more rural than the House Sparrow, it differs in its smaller size, more slender build, the chestnut crown of the head and a black spot on the white neck. It also has a much higher-pitched voice.



GREY PARTRIDGE

Known also as the English Partridge, it is less common than its Red-legged or 'French' cousin. Smaller in size and lacking the red legs of that species, the best distinguishing features are a dark horseshoe-shaped mark on the belly (more noticeable on the male) and a rusty coloured head. Look for groups or 'coveys' of this bird as they feed on the arable fields.

