

DAY 1

After a smooth journey west to the Welsh borders our meeting location was the beautiful Nagshead RSPB Reserve. We decided to eat our packed lunches before exploring the reserve, so we soaked up the birdsong resonating around the glade-like car park; Song Thrush, Robin, Coal Tit, Blue Tit and Great Tit were all in full song.

With everyone set and ready for a walk we headed for the Campbell Hide. A Treecreeper called, Nuthatches climbed through a nearby oak tree, and Goldcrests were seen. The woodlands seemed alive with small birds! 2 Greylags called loudly from the pond nearby, and a Song Thrush gave fantastic views as it sang loudly nearby.

At the crossroads of forest tracks we listened for woodpeckers, hearing a drumming Great Spotted Woodpecker. A Bullfinch called close-by, and at least 6 Ravens flew over “cronking” as they went. Ravens continued to call whilst we stood patiently in the forest, a wonderful atmospheric sound. From the hide we added Common Toad swimming in the pool.

We then made our way to the Lower Hide, finding Treecreeper, Nuthatch, tit species, and Common Buzzard. It was great to see the bright red fruiting bodies of Scarlet Elf Cup along the path edges, and it was a surprise to hear the calls of a Grey Wagtail as it flew over the woodlands.

After an enjoyable woodland walk we moved onto our second location for the day, the village of Parkend. Common Buzzards soared high above the tree-tops, a Mistle Thrush sang nearby, and Chaffinches and Goldfinches were busy foraging in the Yew trees.

Wandering down to the Fountain Inn we were treated to a super fly-past from a Dipper, its buzzing/wren-like flight very distinctive as it flew down river. Our second Grey Wagtail of the day was feeding nearby, and its Pied cousin was found on the cricket pitch as we returned to our vehicles.

We finished the day with a walk around the locality of Parkend Church – set high up from the main village and amongst more magical woodlands. Goldcrests and Coal Tits called as we walked between the tall firs, before we found a few Siskins flying around the tops of a Spruce plantation. The star find was a Firecrest, but despite much patience it stayed hidden as it fed in the canopy above.

As left the church Sian was quick to spot a group of Melanistic Fallow Deer moving through the open woodland, causing vehicles to stop and good views were enjoyed. With lots to talk about, we headed to our base for the weekend sharing stories over a delicious evening meal.

DAY 2

Day 2 started bright but overcast, and after a filling breakfast we headed out for our full day in the Forest of Dean.

After missing Hawfinch yesterday afternoon, we decided to make our first stop of the day in Parkend village to try our luck a second time. We waited quietly and after 10 minutes a Hawfinch called nearby – BINGO! We scanned the trees but without luck. A few more minutes passed as we enjoyed views of several Common Buzzards soaring overhead, and Chaffinches and Goldfinches roosted in the trees nearby. The smaller birds soon attracted the attention of a female Sparrowhawk, which flew just overhead whilst being mobbed closely by 3 Pied Wagtails.

The Hawfinches starting calling again, this time more than one bird, and we soon located a male bird perched atop one of the tall Lime trees. With patience and keen observation we soon spotted at least 3 separate birds feeding below the Yews on the far side of the 'glade', followed shortly by fantastic perched views at the top of the nearby trees. Chuffed with some prolonged superb views of both male and female Hawfinches, we departed on a high to our next location in search of the impressive Goshawk.

At New Fancy Viewpoint we joined 12 other 'spectators' at this now famous vantage point in the heart of the forest. Looking over impressive vistas we were quickly put onto a distant pair of Goshawk! Knowing that we could do better we waited a while longer, watching Siskins and Coal Tits flitting through the tree-tops, and a few Crossbills and a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew over.

As a group of birders left the viewpoint, excited shouts behind us alerted us to the presence of a close female Goshawk flying behind us, followed by another individual on the same side of the viewpoint. We enjoyed great views as these mighty hawks soared ever higher, before diving into the forest below – an impressive sight!

Back in the car park we find Long-tailed Tits, a male Bullfinch perches high in a tree and a pair of Hawfinches fly over – what a place!

Happy with 2 great views of the mighty Goshawk we make our way to Symonds Yat, another awesome viewpoint in the forest, this time looking out above the River Wye. Within seconds of arriving on top of the viewpoint we spot Peregrine perched on a tree, and it was amazing to watch 'dog-fights' between Ravens and Buzzards! After a lunch break we headed back up to the viewpoint where a Marsh Tit frequented the bird seed, 2 female Goosanders were down on the river accompanied with 2 Canada Geese and some Mallards, and several Cormorants were busy at their nesting colony down river. We enjoyed breath-taking views of Buzzards and Ravens as they flew regularly around the viewpoint, and a privilege to observe them from above.

Our next stop was Cannop Ponds. These freshwater pools and lakes lie centrally in the Forest of Dean, and harbour one of the special birds of the area, the Mandarin. Although not a native species, the UK now holds more Mandarins than their native country, and they are a real treat to see. On the main lake we found Mute Swans, Tufted Ducks, Coots, Moorhens, Gadwall, Little Grebes and a lone Wigeon. The Mandarins were hiding in the wet woodland behind us, offering fantastic views as they feed, preen and swim between the trees.

We ended our full day in the forest with an enjoyable walk through the varied forest habitats at Crabtree Hill. The circular walk takes in mature plantations as well as clear-fell areas. We headed straight for the high ground, and quickly located the Great Grey Shrike – its bold plumage standing out against the brown woodland edge. We enjoy very good views as it perches and hunts for prey, during which time we also spot a Goshawk soaring above the forest with 3 Common Buzzards. After enjoying great views of the shrike we continue our circular walk, finding a pair of Stonechats, and great views of a pair of Common Buzzards in an oak. One of the many highlights of the day was finding a flock of Siskins, Redpoll, and tits, feeding in some young birch trees – the siskins glowing brightly in the weak winter light.

DAY 3

A damp morning greeted us on Day 3 of our Welsh Borders trip, but by the time we had arrived at the Wildlife Trust's Taf-Fellen reserve it was dry and light was good.

We wandered down the steep steps down to the River, where we enjoyed plenty of birdsong – Robin, Chaffinch, Treecreeper, Blackbird, and Goldcrest were all singing loudly above the bubbling and fast flowing river. It was special to observe a Goldcrest feeding in an Oak before making a short feeding flight hawking for insects, just like a flycatcher. Further down the gorge we find Great and Blue Tits, and Grey Wagtails fly down stream. The steep wooded valley either side dripped with freshwater springs, and we enjoyed searching for wildflowers with Golden Saxifrage, Lesser Celandine, and Butterbur all flowering along the river banks – the signs of spring are everywhere.

On our return walk we set eyes (very briefly) on a Dipper, as it whizzes down river. Above us, between the gaps in the tree cover, we spot a Red Kite flying high over the river, our first for the day! A few were also lucky enough to spot a Treecreeper on the walk back up out of the gorge.

Back at the minibus, at the top of the gorge, we break for lunch. Common Buzzards circle overhead, before we set off for the spectacle of the Red Kite Feeding Station, spotting a few Red Kite en-route.

On arrival the sky is filled with Red Kites and Buzzards, as they begin to gather in preparation to be fed. Waiting in the hide and viewing screens we wait for the

farmer begin feeding the kites. No sooner has the farmer walked into the feeding area Red Kites begin to drop from the sky in an attempt to pick off first offerings

Over the next hour we are mesmerised by the swirling of 60+ Red Kites, such acrobatic flyers for such a large bird.

Overjoyed with our day in the Brecon Beacons, we head back to our hotel for another enjoyable evening.

DAY 4

After our last breakfast, we check out from our hotel and head out for last day on the Welsh Borders.

Today we culminate our stay by visiting one of the premier and significant reserves in this beautiful area of the UK, the Slimbridge Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust Reserve. As we drive towards the reserve car park, a family herd of Bewick's Swans can be seen in the field to our right. This followed by a pair of Common Cranes flying close to the car park, had got to be the one of the best welcomes to Slimbridge anyone could have.

Our day was split visiting the eastern area first, then a pit-stop for lunch in the café before exploring the remaining parts of the reserve. The first hide was packed with avian action!!! Wildfowl grazed and roosted in their hundreds out in front of us, and beyond them 6 Common Cranes fed on the short grassland. It was a treat to see so many White-fronted Geese, and it was great to see a few skeins of Barnacle Geese flying down the Severn Estuary. We relaxed in the Martin Smith Hide, captivated by so much activity. A Wheatear is spotted far out on the field, a first of the year for most.

Whilst at the Robbie Garnet Hide, suddenly all of the birds lifted high in the sky. We could not see any potential culprit, so we took this as a cue to leave and make our way to the Holden Tower Hide. We join a couple birdwatching, who explain that one of the reserves Screamer's had escaped, and had flown over spooking all the wild birds.

We wander back to the centre, and with bellies rumbling decide to have an slightly early lunch inside the impressive visitor centre and café. Suitably refreshed we explore the captive collections, stopping off at the Van de Bovencamp and Kingfisher Hides. More wildfowl were seen, and there was a flourish of excitement when a female Sparrowhawk flew over.

After the Tropical House, we explore the World Wetlands Collections, stopping at the Hogarth Hide where a more and more wildfowl and waders could be found! Ruff, Common Snipe, Black-tailed Godwits, and Dunlin fed busily in the low water, whilst mixed duck species rested and fed around them. With the day almost at an end we head back to the centre for a last comfort break and spot of shopping in the gift shop before the journey back to Kent.