

# Wild New Forest

## ✦ Guided Tours ✧

Dec 2025 Newsletter

As we come to the end of another wonderful year, we'd like to take a moment to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who has supported us over the past twelve months. Whether you joined us on a guided walk, came along to one of our talks, helped behind the scenes, or followed our journey throughout the year, your encouragement and enthusiasm have meant so much to us.

The New Forest is a truly special place, shaped by its unique landscapes, rich wildlife, and centuries-old traditions, and it has been a privilege to spend the year sharing its stories, seasons, and hidden corners with you.

This newsletter brings together some of our favourite moments from each month from this year's newsletters, celebrating the wildlife encounters, experiences, and memories that made this year so memorable. As we reflect on these highlights, we'd also like to wish you and your loved ones a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, and we look forward to sharing many more adventures in the New Forest in the year ahead.

### January

Is traditionally a fairly settled period for our wildlife, but there is always something to see. It is worth keeping an eye on the weather, as a cold snap or period of snow can trigger a movement of birds, either travelling ahead of the weather front or grounded as a result of it. A cold snap on the continent, especially to the east, can force species to move west into the UK. During times like these, we may see unusual species, such as the White-fronted Goose, Red-necked Grebe, or Smew, appear along the coast. While the Forest itself can seem quiet, it is a good time of year to head out looking for deer.

We have five species in the New Forest (Red, Roe, Fallow, Sika, and Muntjac), all of which can be easier to find now that the leaves have dropped. I am always drawn to the coast at this time of year, which can be full of life. Many wildfowl will be looking their best as they display and establish pairs, while one of my favourites, the Spoonbill, should be fairly easy to find at coastal lagoons. Seabirds are still on the move in January, with Red-throated Divers, in particular, moving through the English Channel.



Great Northern Divers can often be found feeding on crabs closer to shore in sheltered areas. One of my favourite spectacles at this time of year is the gathering of Mediterranean Gulls along the coast at low tide. It is not unusual to find groups of 200 or more foraging along the tideline for periwinkles as the tide recedes. This gathering provides a good opportunity to census numbers of this once uncommon gull. I still get a thrill from seeing so many in one spot at the same time.

*Images: Dartford Warbler, Scarlet Caterpillar Club, Winter Heliotrope © Wild New Forest GT*

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## February

One of those months when we can be lulled into thinking that warmer, brighter days are just around the corner. In reality, the sting of winter can still catch us off guard, and this unpredictability can have a profound impact on our wildlife. A cold snap at this time of year is especially dangerous, as many species are struggling to survive the harsh conditions. Natural food sources are at their lowest ebb, and survival becomes a daily challenge. With the longer days, many animals are pushing through the final stretch of winter, but that last hurdle can sometimes be the hardest. For some of our larger mammals, this period is particularly challenging.



Cold weather limits vegetation growth, making it harder for herbivores to find enough nutritious food. This is when we can see some damage from browsing animals. Deer are often at their most visible at this time of year due to the lack of cover, and it's a joy to see them out and about, still carrying their impressive antlers. They'll continue to hold on to them for another couple of months. Some birds are already starting to nest; Crossbills, for instance, may already have nests, and in many cases, the fledglings are ready to take flight even before the month is over. This early breeding strategy is often a response to the abundant cone crop that's available in the late winter months, which provides essential food for the young birds. At the same time, Ravens are becoming much more active around their nest sites. Their distinctive calls echo through the Forest, as these intelligent and adaptable birds establish and defend their nests. Ravens are known for their elaborate courtship displays and their role in the ecosystem as scavengers. Their presence, along with other early breeders, is a sign that the natural rhythms of the Forest are slowly shifting toward the promise of spring.

*Image: Common Crossbill, Woodfidley © Wild New Forest Guided Tours*

## March

Across the New Forest the signs of spring are all around us, from the noisy hubbub at Rookeries as they squabble over nest building material to the emerging Lesser Celandine giving a flash of colour along streamways and in sheltered spots. Bog Beacon is playing its vital role breaking down leaf litter where it has gathered in standing water and damp corners across the Forest. These bright, settled spells of weather in



March never seem to last long, but they are a wonderful reminder of the turning season. Each moment spent outdoors feels energising—whether it's watching a butterfly bask, hearing the first Chiffchaff song of the year, or simply feeling the warmth of the sun on your skin after months of cold and rain. As spring gathers pace, the Forest will only grow livelier, but for now, these first tentative signs of the season feel like a gift, bringing with them a renewed sense of connection to the natural world.

*Images Bog Beacon, New Forest © Wild New Forest Guided Tours*

## April

One of my favourite places to pause and watch life unfold is along the seawall on the New Forest coast. At this time of year there's a constant hubbub among the Black-headed Gulls, Avocets, Lapwing, and others. For me it's relaxing to watch the comings and goings, but occasionally I focus in on just one individual. Observing a single male Black-headed Gull as it goes about its day gives a glimpse into the pressures of its world. Not only does it need to find enough food and avoid predators (both terrestrial and avian), it must also navigate constant social interactions.

These include asserting its place in the colony's pecking order—a crucial factor in determining where it can nest or access food. Senior, more experienced birds are always at the front of the queue and claim the safest sleeping spots, usually at the centre of the communal roost away from the more vulnerable outer edges.

These seemingly small factors can have a huge impact on their lives. Courtship is also a fascinating (and stressful) affair. I love watching the Black-headed Gulls strut their stuff. From observations of ringed birds, we know they can be monogamous, but they still go through the whole rigmarole each season.

Watching colour-ringed birds opens up a whole new world. At Normandy Marsh we have a cohort of colour-ringed Avocets, some of which have been returning to the lagoon for over a decade. It's fascinating to see how certain individuals have risen through the ranks, becoming senior members of the colony. You often spot the same birds bickering year after year. Living so closely together, they develop complex relationships. It's remarkable to see them cooperating to drive off threats (like a passing Crow or hunting Harrier) then almost immediately turning on one another if one lands too close to a favoured feeding spot or nest site.



*Image: Colour-ringed Avocet and chick, this individual has been frequenting Normandy Lagoon for nearly a decade © Wild New Forest Guided Tours*

## May

Thanks to advances in technology, we are now able to deploy GPS tags on juveniles—each weighing just 1.2g. With support from the New Forest Biodiversity Forum, we've secured three GPS tags for use this year. Working in collaboration with the RSPB, BTO, and Forestry England, we've secured the necessary permissions to tag three juvenile Hawfinches—no small feat, as the licensing process is rightly rigorous.



The equipment that was stolen—two trail cameras and an automated feeder—was vital to this work. Over years of trial and error, we've learned that Hawfinches, though fussy eaters, have a soft spot for black sunflower seeds. They prefer to shell the seeds themselves and will often ignore pre-shelled ones unless food is scarce. By placing small amounts of seed in favoured feeding spots, we can encourage birds to return consistently to these locations. There, we use trail cameras with high enough resolution to read colour rings, allowing us to identify individual birds. With cameras placed at a few discreet forest locations,

we're able to gather data on movement between sites, site fidelity, social interactions, and even behaviours such as courtship and monogamy within flocks.

*Image: Juvenile male Hawfinch, New Forest © Wild New Forest Guided Tours*



## June/July



Thanks to advances in technology, we're now able to use tiny GPS tags—each weighing just 1.2g—to track juvenile birds. With support from the New Forest Biodiversity Forum, we secured three of these special tags for this year. After a lot of careful planning (and a rigorous licensing process), we're excited to say that we've now successfully GPS-tagged two juvenile Hawfinches.

It's early days, but already we're learning more about how these secretive birds move through the forest. We're lucky to have a fantastic team of volunteers helping us keep track of their locations and collect valuable records. Their dedication is making this work possible—and we're really looking forward to what we'll discover in the weeks ahead.

*Image: Adult male and juvenile Hawfinch, New Forest, June 2025 © Wild New Forest Guided Tours*

## August

Down on the coast, change is afoot. After the frenetic activity of the tern and gull colonies, there's always a moment of quiet anti-climax once the chicks fledge and the birds disperse. What was once a noisy, chaotic marsh filled with squabbling adults and hungry young suddenly falls silent. But relief—and excitement—comes in late July as the waders return. Recently, I've taken great pleasure in watching small flocks of Dunlin and Black-tailed Godwit wheeling over the marsh, much to the dismay of territorial Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers, who protest loudly when the newcomers land in their patch.

But the real highlight, for me, is watching the Oystercatchers. These long-lived birds are wonderful parents—often dividing the brood between the adults, each carefully feeding and guiding their chick. Watching them deliver lugworms or molluscs, delicately preparing the food for their young, is both entertaining and heartwarming. The anticipation in the chick as the adult flies in calling is a joy to behold.



*Image: Adult Oystercatcher feeding juvenile at Normandy Lagoon © Wild New Forest Guided Tours*

## September



Out on the heaths, colour still lingers. Ling has put on a particularly fine show this year; even as it starts to fade, the heath is looking especially beautiful. Autumn specialists such as Autumn Lady'sresses, Field Gentian, Marsh Gentian, and Devil's-bit Scabious are flowering, though seemingly in smaller numbers than usual. While it can be a quiet time for birdlife as many species go through their annual post-breeding moult, this is when many birds compensate for their reduced speed and agility — caused by the loss of flight and secondary feathers — by keeping ultra-quiet and low profile. However, migration is now gathering pace.

At Keyhaven, we've been recording good numbers of Whitethroats and Willow Warblers moving south, and it has been a bumper year for Spotted Flycatchers, with birds appearing on many of our recent Forest walks. Along the coast, the lull that follows the noisy breeding season of terns, gulls, and Avocets is giving way to autumn arrivals. With the recent rain filling the lagoons, it won't be long before the evocative cries of Grey Plover and the bubbling calls of Brent Geese echo across the marshes, signalling the next chapter in the seasonal cycle. *Image: Telegraph Hill, August 2025 © Wild New Forest Guided Tour*

## October

This week we kicked off our annual series of Fungi Explorer Walks. It's been a real joy to spend time in the woods, slowing down the pace and simply marvelling at the fungi world. I've dusted off my trusty fungi mirror and hand lens — though I'm not sure my knees are quite as enthusiastic! You know you've had a good session when you come back with muddy knees. We are incredibly fortunate to live in, or to visit, one of the most diverse areas in Britain (and possibly Europe) for fungi.

With over 2,700 species recorded, the New Forest really does punch above its weight. This richness comes from the Forest's unique mix of habitats, its long history as crown land, and the sympathetic management that has helped protect it from development. As with all aspects of natural history, no two years are the same. Climate and seasonal cycles influence both the abundance and timing of fungi emergence.



This year, we've already seen an impressive early flush of Porcelain Fungus (*Oudemansiella mucida*) across the Forest, along with a good showing of species such as Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), Grey Spotted Amanita (*Amanita excelsa*), and some impressive numbers of delicate fungi such as the tiny Parachutes (*Marasmius* species). Of course, what we see is only the fruiting body — just a small, yet significant, part of a much larger organism doing the vital job of breaking down dead and dying organic material. Without fungi recycling nutrients, we would quite literally be up to our eyes in debris, and a whole host of species — from earthworms to oaks — would struggle to harness the resources they need to grow. Not all fungi are recyclers, however. Many, like Fly Agaric, form vital partnerships with trees, while others, such as Southern Bracket on beech trees, live as parasites before eventually helping to recycle their host.

*Image: Porcelain Fungus, September 2025 © Wild New Forest Guided Tours*

## November

Was packed full of wildlife activities: early-morning bird ringing sessions produced beautiful Firecrests and good numbers of Lesser Redpoll, while our trail cameras captured new footage of a Pine Marten moving through the woodland. We explored the fascinating world of fungi, recording an impressive range of species, including the weird and wonderful Stinkhorn Fungus to the beautiful and delicate Fluted Bird's Nest.

A bioblitz, moth trapping, and some fantastic wildlife career talks from our own Tommy Saunders and Andy Tucker from Naturetrek rounded off a busy and rewarding programme. But as always, the real highlight wasn't any single activity — it was the energy and enthusiasm of the group. Watching the youngsters gather around field guides, debating tricky identifications, or sharing hints and tips with each other was genuinely inspiring. Their passion, cooperation, and curiosity remind me exactly why these camps are so valuable — and why the future of wildlife conservation is in safe hands.



Our Wildlife Explorers continue to grow as a community of young people who care deeply about the New Forest and its wildlife. Many started attending our camps or guided walks as early teens and have gone on to volunteer with us, contribute to surveys, and even pursue ecology-related studies and careers. What's perhaps most rewarding is seeing the older participants mentoring the younger ones — passing on their skills and enthusiasm in exactly the same way they once received it.

As we look ahead to 2026, we're excited to share that our **events diary is now open**, with a wide range of guided experiences planned throughout the year, including:

### What's coming up in 2026...

- 🌿 Seasonal wildlife safaris in the New Forest and along the coast
- 🦋 Birding days at places such as Poole Harbour and Purbeck
- 🚶 Our monthly *Twelve Wild Walks*, exploring different areas of the Forest
- 🚤 Scenic Beaulieu River Boat Tours
- 🌲 Guided walks including *Wildlife Wander*, *Heart of the Forest*, and themed seasonal walks
- 🦋 Full-day wildlife trips to locations such as Martin Down & Somerset Levels
- 👨👩👧 Family-friendly nature adventures designed to inspire young naturalists
- 🎤 A programme of talk evenings and special events throughout the year

Full details and booking information can be found on our website at [www.wildnewforestguidedtours.co.uk](http://www.wildnewforestguidedtours.co.uk).

*We recommend booking early, as many events fill up quickly. We can't wait to welcome you back and share another year of discovery in the New Forest.*

### Still Time for a Last-Minute Christmas Gift! 🎄

Looking for the perfect Christmas present for nature lovers, adventure seekers, or someone who could use a little escape into the great outdoors? There's still time to give the gift of adventure with our **Guided Walk Gift Vouchers**.

Our vouchers are a thoughtful and unique way to inspire exploration and create unforgettable memories in the New Forest. Redeemable across all of our trips, they let your recipient choose the experience that suits them best — from gentle wildlife walks to full-day adventures.



Choose your amount and add a personalised message to make this gift truly your own. Simple, meaningful, and perfect for those last-minute Christmas surprises!

<https://www.wildnewforestguidedtours.co.uk/gift-card>

Thank you once again for all your support, and we can't wait to share many more New Forest adventures, wildlife encounters, and special moments with you in 2026.

Wishing you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.



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