

The New Forest Whisper

The Newsletter of Wild New Forest Guided Tours

May 2026

It seems that every year, a familiar topic of conversation among naturalists in the field is just how unusual the spring has been. But is there really such a thing as a “normal” spring season? In truth, very few springs are ever the same.

This year’s defining feature has been the instability of the weather, fluctuating between warm, settled periods and colder, blustery spells. There have also been several notable periods of northerly and easterly air-flow, making conditions feel decidedly chilly at times. In addition, following the exceptionally wet winter experienced across our region, spring rainfall has so far been below average and largely showery in nature. As a result, the ground has dried out remarkably quickly once again.

All of these vagaries of the weather impact our wildlife in different ways. The early warm and settled conditions encouraged many of our plants into early bloom, with some species flowering particularly early. Of special note was the early flowering of Bluebells across the Forest and the wonderful early show of Hawthorn blossom, providing all-important resources for a range of invertebrate species — and, of course, a delight to see.

Alongside the early flowering, bud burst was also rather advanced this year. This is something I keep a particularly keen eye on, as the bursting of buds and sprouting of new leaves in our deciduous woodlands triggers the start of the nesting season for many small woodland birds, including the Hawfinch. This timing is crucial, not only because the fresh green canopy provides cover for vulnerable nests, but also because the young leaves provide an important food source for many invertebrates — in particular Winter Moth, Dunbar and Green Oak Tortrix moth larvae — which in turn become a valuable and easily obtainable food source for many hungry mouths.

These small green caterpillars can often be seen hanging from silken threads as you move through New Forest woodlands. This is usually a rapid escape response to avoid predation; once danger has passed, they will climb back up into the canopy to continue devouring buds and leaves.



At this time of year, our Beech trees also begin developing their seeds, often referred to as mast, giving us an early indication of how good the autumn crop might be. This is significant, as beech mast is an incredibly important food source for a wide range of species. Just this week, I was looking at a Beech and Hornbeam in Pondhead Inclosure, both of which had a good abundance of developing mast, so prospects are looking encouraging for the season ahead. However, a dry summer can still scupper the crop, resulting in dry, desiccated seeds that, although plentiful, contain very little nutritional value.

Image: Beech mast © Wild New Forest GT, May 2026

What to see over the next few weeks

One of the highlights for me, and a sure sign that summer is just around the corner, is the arrival of the Nightjar, which is now churring at locations across the Forest. With forecasters promising warmer weather ahead, Nightjars should become increasingly active and vocal. If you pick your location wisely, you can often also hear drumming Snipe and roding Woodcock on the same evening.

Along with the Nightjar, other late spring migrants such as Hobby and Spotted Flycatcher are now settling into the Forest and are great species to keep an eye out for through June.

Meanwhile, at the coast, our seabirds should be close to hatching, prompting frenzied feeding trips from Little, Common and Sandwich Terns, while Black-headed and Mediterranean Gulls will be as busy — and noisy — as ever. There is nothing quite like arriving at the coastal marshes and hearing that cacophony of gulls and terns as you draw close to the seawall; I just love the hubbub of the coast in summer.

It's not all about birds, though. Out on the heaths, Silver-studded Blue butterflies will soon be on the wing and, where numbers are high, you can sometimes witness waves of shimmering blue butterflies drifting across the heather.

On hot days, heathland insects can be wonderfully abundant. Among my favourites to watch are the Green Tiger Beetles as they patrol their patches in search of prey. In the sandier areas, colonies of Beewolf can also harbour a fascinating variety of solitary bees and wasps.

Just recently, we visited a regular Beewolf colony that we have monitored for years, only to find all the nesting holes had been dug out and predated. It didn't take long to discover the culprit — a nearby pair of nesting Green Woodpeckers with, presumably, some very well-fed young!

It is not all about what you can see — or indeed hear — at this time of year. As we move into late spring, the early flush of gorse flowers begins to fade and with it that wonderful coconut aroma that drifts across the heath on warm days. In its place comes one of my favourite scents of all: Douglas Fir warming in the sunshine. Although not a native tree, whenever I catch that rich, resinous smell, I know I am home.



Images: Little Tern, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Grey Seal and a Toad in a hole! © Wild New Forest GT, Apr & May 2026



Wildlife Explorers Club

This month, our Wildlife Explorers have been busier than ever, with plenty of exciting adventures and unforgettable experiences along the way!

We kicked off the month with our Wildlife Explorers Talk Evening, and what an incredible success it was. Seven of our Explorers bravely stepped up to share their passion and knowledge, speaking on everything from the fascinating history of the New Forest to butterflies, wildlife survey work, and much more.

It's truly inspiring to see such enthusiasm, confidence, and dedication from the next generation of conservationists. Their passion for wildlife and the forest shines through in everything they do, and it gives us great hope for the future of conservation in the New Forest.

A huge thank you to everyone who came along to support the Explorers and cheer them on throughout the evening.

Out in the field, we've continued our survey work at Wiverley, where the Explorers have been getting hands-on experience learning survey techniques, discovering new species, and developing valuable teamwork skills. Every session brings something different, and there's always excitement about what wildlife might appear next!

And the adventures certainly don't stop there... We have some amazing experiences coming up, including visiting a Goshawk nest, taking part in even more wildlife surveys, and one of the most anticipated activities of all — Hawfinch ringing! These are opportunities the Explorers will never forget, giving them a real insight into the world of wildlife conservation and fieldwork.

The club is open to all youngsters aged 10-18 and is free to join thanks to sponsorship from Naturetrek and Love the Forest. Details, and application form for the club can be found on our website [here](#).

The Wildlife Explorers Club is made possible thanks to funding and support from the following organisations:



April and May Walk Highlights

One of our favourite walks at this time of year is the Nightjar walk. It is always lovely to see the sunset in the Forest, so it was exciting to run our first walk of the year earlier this month. Thankfully, the Nightjars performed well and gave us some excellent views. We were also fortunate to enjoy great views of roding Woodcock and drumming Snipe.

It is not all about crepuscular (my favourite word!) activity, though. We set off a little early to explore the area, and the walk started well with a Firecrest in the car park, followed by views of Dartford Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher. We also had an impromptu session on bird song and identification, looking in particular at the differences between Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff.



Spring migration walks down at the coast are also a favourite of mine, as anything can turn up at any time. This month, our walk coincided with an excellent passage of wading birds, including several hundred Bar-tailed Godwits and scores of Grey Plovers mixed in with Whimbrel, Knot, Sanderling and Dunlin. Added to the mix was a passage of Mediterranean Gulls and the constant cacophony of terns in courtship, coming and going along the shoreline.

The Beaulieu River Boat Trip remains a firm favourite in the diary. There has been a real feel of spring, with terns frequently fishing along the river, the occasional Osprey, and good numbers of Whimbrel passing through on migration. Swallows and House Martins are back nesting in their usual haunts and, as always, the seals are spending most of their time simply chilling along the river.

Image: Summer plumaged Dunlin at Normandy Lagoon on Spring Migration Walk © WNFGE May 2026

April & May Fieldwork

One of the main areas of focus in April and May is the Hawfinch RAS (Ringing Adults for Survival), which sees us out in the Forest at study sites, both ringing new Hawfinches and recording those ringed in previous years. The data generated helps us build a clearer picture of Hawfinch ecology and how these birds move around and use the various habitats within the New Forest. We are also actively collecting data on nesting attempts.

Continuing with the birds, April also sees the start of the Keyhaven CES (Constant Effort Site), now in its 11th year. This intensive ringing study sees us out on site once in every 10-day period from late April to late September. Data generated from the study not only helps inform us about the status of common breeding birds locally, but also contributes to the national dataset as part of a network of CES sites across the country

Elsewhere, recent fieldwork includes our BTO BBS survey (Breeding Bird Survey) at our regular site in Brockenhurst, and we have also been supporting local landowners with baseline ecological surveys.

The Pine Marten study continues, and this month we gathered to perform the rather unpleasant task of carrying out a basic autopsy on three roadkill Pine Martens, one of which contained the fascinating, albeit rather gruesome, remains of an adult mouse and several juvenile mice in its stomach. This important work helps us gather data that would otherwise not be accessible and allows us to collect samples for DNA analysis.

On a more positive note, we retrieved several clips of Pine Martens over the past month, including multiple recordings of individuals using monitored underpasses. At this stage, we are still gathering data, but we hope to use the findings to help mitigate roadkill and develop safer crossing points for Pine Martens.



New Forest Ringing Group May update

As mentioned above, this month saw the start of the annual CES survey at Keyhaven. With two sessions completed at the time of writing, we have caught a good mix of new birds alongside some old friends returning to the site for another breeding season. The highlight has to be the capture of an adult male Magpie. Magpies tend to provoke mixed responses from both birders and the wider public, but up close they really are beautiful birds and highly intelligent.



To date, the RAS has produced around 17 newly ringed Hawfinches and a similar number of returning birds processed, many of which are regulars. The oldest dates back to 2021, when he was ringed as being at least two years old.

Ringing recoveries have been dominated by the terns this month, with several colour-ringed Little, Common, and Sandwich Terns back in the colony and being regularly reported by birders. We really appreciate these records, and thank you to everyone who takes the time to report a sighting — it is hugely appreciated.

Interesting tern records this month include a Little Tern that was ringed as a chick on Normandy Lagoon in 2021 and is apparently breeding at a coastal colony in the Netherlands, along with a Sandwich Tern that was ringed as a chick in the colony in 2023 and is apparently breeding at Brownsea Lagoon, Dorset.

In addition, we continue to receive records of Sandwich Terns from Lyminster wintering together at a saltworks in Namibia, some 11,500 km away. We have also received news of a colour-ringed Little Tern that was ringed as a chick on Normandy Lagoon and possibly bred in the colony at Chesil Beach in 2021. At the same time, a Little Tern ringed as a chick at Chesil Beach in 2019 has recently been recorded at Keyhaven and Normandy Lagoon, highlighting the strong interchange between sites.

Image: Adult Male Hawfinch, New Forest © WNFGT May 2026

Upcoming Events

This summer, we've kept many of our favourite walks in the diary, including our popular Lymington Walk, Lyndhurst Walk, and Hampton Ridge tours. Alongside these much-loved experiences, we've also added our exciting Nightjar Walks, which are already nearly fully booked!

Due to demand, our very popular Bird Ringing Demonstrations are continuing, with even more dates now added, alongside visits to the beautiful Manor of Sway and plenty of opportunities to enjoy our Beaulieu River Boat Tours. With so many fantastic wildlife experiences and outdoor adventures planned, there's something for everyone to enjoy this summer.

And we're already looking ahead to autumn too! As many of our tours book up quickly, we've added several fungi walk dates to the calendar already — because before we know it, fungi season will be back once again!

We can't wait to share another season full of wildlife, discovery, and adventure with you all!



Beaulieu River Boat Tour	Beaulieu River Extended Cruise	Wild Wilverley Walk
11th July - 1400-1630	30th May - 1500- 1800	2nd June - 1000-1200
26th July - 1400-1630	9th July - 1100-1400	15th July - 1200-1400
4th Aug - 0830-1100	Newtown Harbour	12th Aug - 1000-1200
7th Aug - 1100-1330		6th Sept - 1300-1500
23rd Aug - 1400-1630	20th July - 1600-2000 Lymington	20th Oct - 1000-1200
5th Sept - 1030- 1300	16th Aug - 1400-1800	13th Nov - 1300-1500
4th Oct - 1100-1330	Birdwatching for beginners	Hatchet Pond Wild Walk & Picnic
3rd Sept - 0800-1100	22nd June - 0900- 1100	20th June - 1100-1400
31st Oct - 0800-1100	17th July - 0800-1000	15th Aug - 1000-1300
Sunset River Cruise	9th Aug - 0900-1100	18th Aug - 1100-1400
21st June - 1800-2000	Photographic Workshop	Coastal Bird Walk
29th June - 1830-2030	11th July - 0900-1300 - Terns and Coastal Birds	17th July - 1700-1900
31st July 1830-2030	29th Aug - 1000-1400 - Coastal Birds	9th Aug - 1300-1500
27th Aug - 1730-1930	1st Nov - 1000-1400 - Fungi	11th Sept - 1700-1900

1-Hour Discovery Walk	Butterfly Explorer Walk	Three-Hour Birding
2nd July - 1200-1300	04th June - 0900-1100	21st June - 1400-1700
10th July - 1400-1500	3rd July - 1000-1200	4th July - 1400-1700
10th Aug - 1000-1100	15th July - 0900-1100	21st Aug - 0800-1100
Woodland Bird Walk	Flora Explorer Walk	
27th May - 1100-1300	16th May - 1000-1200	5th Sept - 1300-1600
22nd June - 1200-1400	19th June - 1000-1200	2nd Oct - 1200-1500
10th Aug - 0700-0900	23rd July - 1030-1230	8th Nov - 1200-1500
25th Sept - 0900-1100	Discover Nature: Family Adventure	Nightjar Discovery walks
Halloween Walk	27th July - 1000-1200	19th June - 1930-2230
30th Oct - 1500-1700	31st July - 1200-1400	3rd July - 2000-2300
31st Oct - 1500-1700	11th Aug - 1400-1600	10th July - 1900-2200
	17th Aug - 1300-1500	7th Aug - 1930-2230
		14th Aug - 1830-2130

Heart of the Forest Wildlife Walk: Lyndhurst
28th May - 1000-1200
23rd June - 1000-1200
13th July 1300-1500
19th Aug - 1000-1200
11th Sept - 1000-1200
21st Oct - 1400-1600
6th Nov- 1000-1200
Wildlife of the Open Forest: Hampton Ridge
25th June - 1000-1200
19th Aug - 1400-1600
9th Sept - 1400-1600
5th Oct - 1400-1600
11th Nov -1400-1600

From Forest to Sea: Lymington Wildlife Walk
3rd June - 1000-1200
27th July - 1400-1600
1st Aug - 1100-1300
9th Sept 1000-1200
5th Oct - 1000-1200
11th Nov - 1000-1200
Twelve Wild Walks
28th June -1100-1400
19th July - 1300-1600
2nd Aug - 1200-1500
14th Sept - 1500-1800
30th Oct - 1200-1500
28th Nov - 1300-1600

New Forest Wildlife wander
30th May -1200-1400
6th June -1400-1600
18th July - 1000-1200
11th Aug -1000-1200
13th Sept - 1300-1500
10th Oct - 1000-1200
15th Nov - 1300-1500
Bird Ringing Demo
18th May - 0800-1100
1st June - 0800-11-00
19th July - 0800-11-00
17th Aug - 0800-11-00
6th Sept - 0800-11-00
14th Nov - 0800-11-00

Fungi Tours				
Culverley	Eyeworth Pond	Boltons Bench	Millyford Bridge	Rufus Stone
4th Oct - 1430-1630	18th Oct - 1300-1500	28th Oct - 1000-1200	2nd Oct - 0900-1100	31st Oct -1200-1400
7th Nov-1000-1200	5th Nov- 1100-1300	8th Nov - 0900-1199	20th Nov - 1200-1400	28th Nov - 0900-1100