

# Heathland Birds of Cannock Chase

## Stonechat



Stonechats are resident birds of open heaths, nesting on or near the ground in dense vegetation. They are often seen perching on top of gorse, tall heather or bracken, and their call sounds like two stones being hit together, hence the name. The males are bright and bold, with a blackish head, white half-collar and russet breast. The back is dark. The female will often be nearby, so keep your eyes open. She is less colourful, without the white collar, but still a striking bird. In the summer you may be lucky enough to see a family party. The youngsters are spotted and streaky all over. They can have two or even three broods a year.

## Common Whitethroat

Like Stonechats, Whitethroats often sit on top of low vegetation to sing. They are summer migrants and winter in Africa, south of the Sahara. They have a white throat which stands out in contrast to a darkish grey crown and rufous brown back. The female is browner. They nest in scrubby areas and their song is best described as a chattering scratchy warble with a jerky and jolting rhythm. It sings frequently, sometimes in the air in a display flight.



## Cuckoo



We are lucky enough to still hear the sound of the Cuckoo across the heathland on the Chase, as these iconic summer migrants have disappeared from much of their former habitat. More often heard than seen, Cuckoos have pointed wings and long tails, vaguely resembling a bird of prey in flight. Perched birds often droop their wings. Arriving in late April they do not build nests, but lay a single egg in the nest of another bird, often Meadow or Tree Pipits. When the chick hatches it pushes the host's chicks out of the nest. Growing rapidly, the young Cuckoos soon dwarf their foster parents. By late summer they have started their journey back to their wintering grounds in tropical Africa.

## Tree Pipit and Meadow Pipit



Two birds which look very similar are the Tree Pipit (top) and the Meadow Pipit (below). Both can be found in the heaths of Cannock Chase. Tree Pipits, as their name suggests will perch in trees. Look for them in scattered Birch trees, usually on the top or on an exposed branch. They have a distinctive display flight, rising into the air and then parachuting down into a different tree whilst singing, a liquid series of trills and repeated notes. They are summer visitors, wintering in Africa.



Meadow Pipits on the other hand are resident and associated with grassland as well as heathland. Their upperparts are more heavily streaked than Tree Pipits and the breast off-white to buff. Meadow Pipits are ground dwelling, and the song flight, less varied and fluty, usually starts and ends on the ground.

## Skylark and Woodlark



Both Skylark and Woodlark are more often heard than seen.

The liquid song of the **Skylark** (top) fills the air as the bird sings high up in the sky, hovering and just a dot in the sky. On the ground they are fairly inconspicuous, but when the crest is erected they are unmistakable. Skylarks are resident and can be seen all year.

**Woodlarks** (below) are migrants, and do not arrive on the Chase until late February or March, being the first of the summer visitors. Whilst looking superficially like Skylarks, Woodlarks have short tails, no crest, and a broad white stripe above the eye, which reaches right round the head, joining in a v at the back. Woodlarks usually sing in flight, sometimes circling at a lower altitude than Skylark, but will also sing from a perch in a tree. Their song is a beautiful melodic series of notes, often heard very early in the morning.



## Nightjar

Cannock Chase is the midland stronghold for this heathland species, although they are rarely seen as they are nocturnal.

Cryptically coloured and ground nesting, they are superbly camouflaged, and are difficult to see. Even lying along a branch they are difficult to spot. Just as it is getting dark they become active, their song a strange mechanical sound like a distant motorbike or machine. Flying low across the heath with open mouths they catch moths and other insects on the wing.



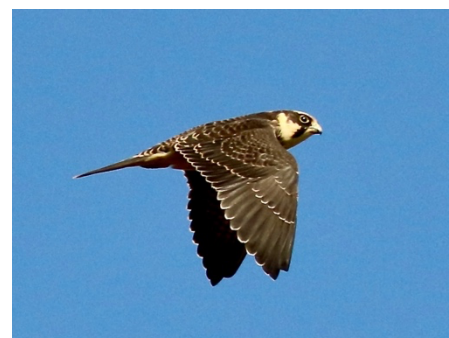
**Most of these heathland birds nest on or near the ground, and their nests are well hidden. They can be easily disturbed by dogs and people straying off the path. Please keep to main paths with dogs on leads or under close control during the nesting season, from March to August.**



## Birds of Prey

**Kestrels** are present all year. With a distinctive chestnut brown back and the male sporting a contrasting grey head, they are small mammal specialists, and will hover while looking for movement below.

Another falcon you may see if you are very lucky is the **Hobby**. They are summer visitors, arriving in April or early May. They have a dashing flight and are able to catch small birds and large insects, such as dragonflies, in the air. They have a striking face pattern, and their back is dark grey.





**Buzzards** are large with broad wings and “fingers”. They can be seen soaring over the heathland, with slow wingbeats and often gliding effortlessly, wings motionless. Since the end of the twentieth century they have spread rapidly from the west, and are now common across the whole of England. Their high-pitched mewling call is distinctive.

**Photo credits:** All photos by Chris Evans, except Cuckoo and Nightjar (Joe Banton) and Buzzard (Pixabay)

You can listen to the songs and calls of all these birds on the xeno canto website: [xeno-canto.org](http://xeno-canto.org), or identify songs and calls by using a bird app such as Merlin (downloadable for free).

**The West Midland Bird Club is the largest regional ornithological club in the UK, covering the counties of Staffordshire, the West Midlands, Warwickshire and Worcestershire.**

**Members receive a quarterly Newsletter, WMBC News, and get access to four bird reserves managed by the Club, two of which, Belvide and Blithfield, are in Staffordshire. Field trips run monthly from Birmingham.**

**The Stafford branch carries out a survey of the breeding birds of Cannock Chase every five years, funded by a grant from the Sustainable Development Fund administered by the Cannock Chase National Landscape unit and Stafford Borough Council. We monitor key species and our data tracks distribution and changes in population of vulnerable species. Our results are shared with all relevant stakeholders, and help to shape future management of this vulnerable habitat. We also engage in other conservation projects. We are currently assessing Swift populations in and around Stafford, with a view to erecting Swift boxes in suitable areas.**

**The Stafford branch also offers monthly indoor meetings from October to March, as well as monthly local field trips and occasional coach trips.**

**For further details check out our website <https://www.westmidlandbirdclub.org.uk> , Facebook or X (formally twitter)**

