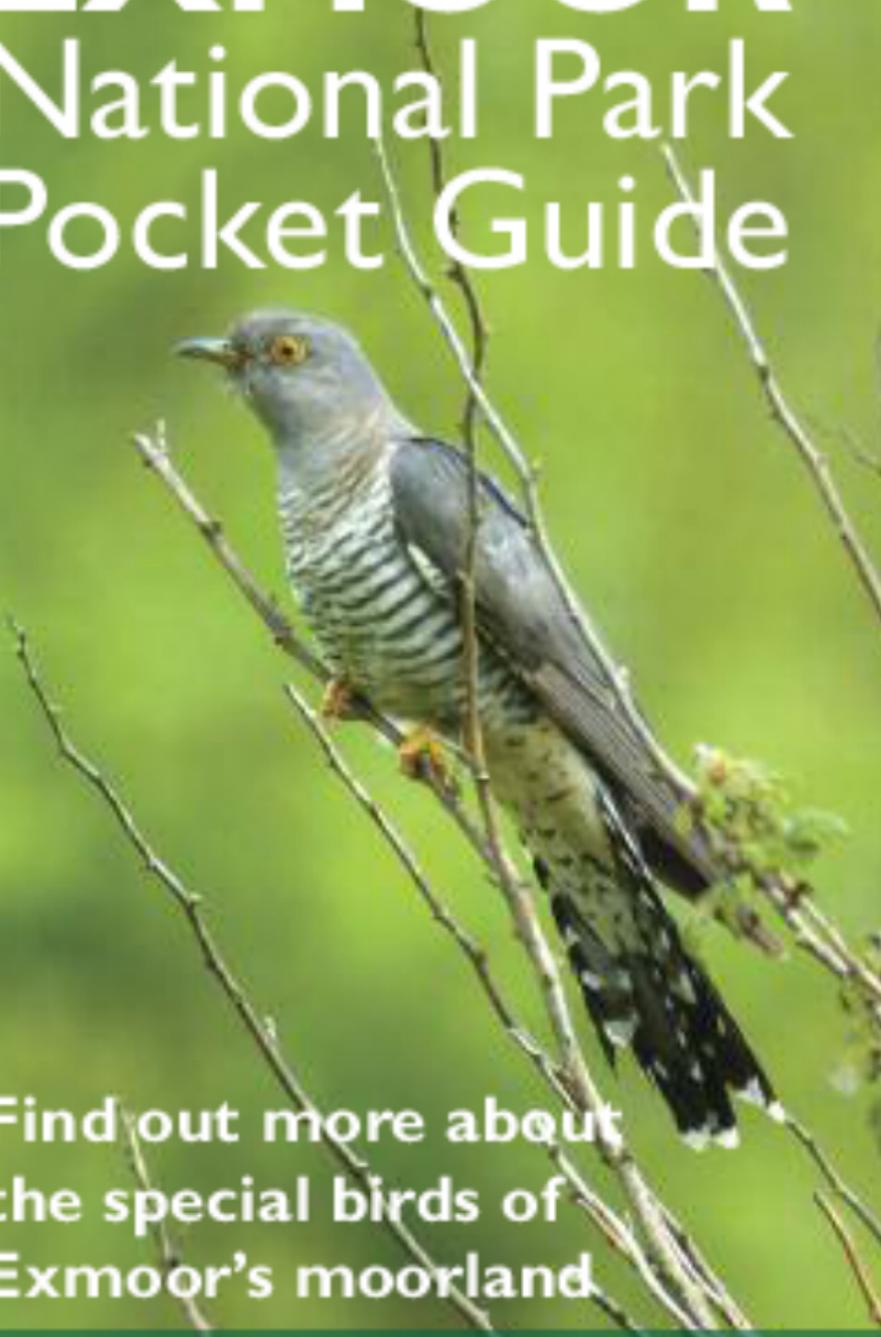


Moorland Birds of **EXMOOR** National Park Pocket Guide



Find out more about
the special birds of
Exmoor's moorland



Habitats and management

Moorland on Exmoor consists of an intimate mixture of dry and wet upland and lowland heathland and bogs, bracken and scrub with rivers and streams.

Although moorland may appear to be wild, it needs to be maintained by traditional management such as grazing, moorland burning (known as swaling) and controlling bracken. Some birds have a preference for particular habitat types:

1. heather/gorse/scrub: Heather moorland is dominated by a mixture of heather, bell heather, whortleberry (or bilberry) and gorse, often interspersed with windswept hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel trees. It can be found inland on Dunkery Beacon, Withypool Common, Winsford Hill, Molland Moor, Haddon Hill and along the coast from Holdstone Down to the west to North Hill to the east. Birds to look out for on heather moorland include meadow pipit, stonechat, linnet, Dartford warbler, lesser redpoll, yellowhammer, tree pipit and whitethroat. Heather moorland requires ongoing management including grazing by cattle and Exmoor ponies and swaling. Scrub is a very important part of this moorland environment and provides sheltered habitat for a number of birds, some of which use it for nesting.



2. bracken/grassland: On the hill tops, skylarks are numerous and widespread, while other areas of moorland particularly in sheltered combes are more of a grassland and bracken mix and these areas are important for birds such as whinchat and rare fritillary butterflies, or wheatear where the turf is short. Bracken requires management such as grazing, cutting or bruising to prevent it becoming too dominant. Grazed grassland areas can provide important feeding areas in spring for birds such as the ring ouzel which sadly now only visits Exmoor on passage.



3. moorland/woodland edge: Where moorland sweeps down to valleys with oak woodland, the habitat here can be very valuable for a number of birds which rely on trees. Redstart and willow warbler occur in good numbers on the moorland edge and are both increasing on Exmoor despite concerns about their status nationally.



4. mires/wet heath: Blanket bog or mires are characterised by plants that thrive on waterlogged, acid peats such as bog-mosses, cottongrasses and deer sedge with cross-leaved heath in more heathy areas. They occur on deep peats on the moorland plateau and because it requires very wet conditions, it is concentrated in the south-western part of Exmoor, where the prevailing winds result in the highest rainfall levels. Recent restoration of degraded mires has led to increases in birds such as snipe and reed bunting, whilst curlew remain in very small numbers on Exmoor. The characteristic sound of the grasshopper warbler can often be heard in these wetter areas. Mires and wet heath are best managed by grazing cattle or Exmoor ponies.



5. rivers and streams: Most of Exmoor's rivers and streams have their source on the high moors and either head north, plunging only a few miles to the Bristol Channel or combine to form the River Exe that flows southwards for more than 80 kilometres to the English Channel. Here the characteristic species of fast flowing rivers can be regularly seen such as the grey wagtail, dipper and kingfisher.



Where to spot moorland breeding birds

Exmoor's moorland is great for birdwatching, here are 7 of the best places:

1. West Coast heathlands just to the east of Combe Martin have very steep slopes dropping down to the cliffs below providing a dramatic view along the Exmoor coast. There are three car parks between Trentishoe and Holdstone Downs. The area still supports Dartford warblers and also has good numbers of linnet, lesser redpoll, stonechat, whitethroat and willow warbler (right).



2. Blackpitts lies to the north of Simonsbath just to the west of the B3223 below Brendon Two Gates with informal roadside parking. It is an extensive area of blanket bog owned by the National Park Authority which has been restored in recent years and is a good place to see snipe, reed bunting, grasshopper warbler and occasionally short-eared owls.

3. Molland and West Anstey Commons lie along the southern edge of Exmoor, to the west of Dulverton and is bisected by a road with small informal car parks. They support a variety of habitats from wet mires to deep incised combes and scrub. This mix of habitats enables them to support good populations of cuckoo, grasshopper warbler, kestrel, linnet and lesser redpoll, reed bunting, stonechat, whinchat, occasional tree pipit, whitethroat and yellowhammer.

4. Winsford Hill is a block of moorland with some deeply incised combes. There is a road running along its crest with a small parking area. The site is an excellent place to hear and spot cuckoos and it has good areas of gorse, scattered trees and scrub that support breeding linnet, lesser redpoll (left), reed bunting, stonechat, whitethroat, yellowhammer and willow warbler. It is a regular breeding site for whinchats and there are snipe and grasshopper warblers in the mires on the western side.



5. North Hill and Bossington Hill between Minehead and Porlock is probably the most important site on Exmoor for Dartford warblers, where the birds hung on through the harsh winters of 2009 and 2010 and where there has been some recovery in the population. It also has the densest population of whitethroats on Exmoor and is an important place for other heathland and scrub species, notably linnet, lesser redpoll and stonechat.



6. Dunkery is an extensive area of moorland owned by the National Trust and forming part of the Dunkery and Homer Wood National Nature Reserve, it includes the highest point on Exmoor at Dunkery Beacon. Dunkery supports a great variety of bird species including cuckoo, curlew, grasshopper warbler, kestrel, linnet, lesser redpoll, reed bunting, redstart (along the south west edge), stonechat, occasional snipe and tree pipit, whinchat and whitethroat, willow warbler and yellowhammer around the edges. Look out for grey wagtails around the streams.

7. Haddon Hill is a relatively small area of outlying heathland owned by Exmoor National Park Authority. It is easily accessible off the B3190 and has a car park. The heathland is bordered by woodland and has a mix of shrubs and scattered trees. It is a good place to look out for cuckoo, linnet, lesser redpoll, meadow pipit, reed bunting, redstart, skylark, stonechat, tree pipit, whitethroat, willow warbler and yellowhammer. Before the cold winters it was a good place for Dartford warblers so this species is also worth looking and listening out for.



Discover Exmoor's moorland birds...

Exmoor's moorland supports a wealth of moorland birds.

A survey undertaken in 2014 shows that many song bird species are faring much better on Exmoor than in the UK as a whole.

Although some upland breeding birds such as red grouse and ring ouzel no longer breed on Exmoor, it has become of increasing importance for species such as whinchat, stonechat and cuckoo. Exmoor's moorland may well be providing important refuges for many species both now and in the future.



See inside for the results of the 2014 moorland bird survey.

Whinchat. Steve Knoll (rspb-images.com)

What can you do to help conserve Exmoor's breeding birds?

Many factors play a part in influencing the success of breeding birds including land management, climate change and human disturbance. If birds are disturbed while nesting, eggs or young can become vulnerable to predators, or just become too cold to survive.

During the bird breeding season, from 1st March to 15th July, you can minimise disturbance by:

- Keeping to tracks and paths as much as possible, particularly in areas of dense heather and wetlands.
- Keeping your dog on a lead especially as most lambing takes place at the same time that birds are nesting.



- Avoid young birds on the ground or distressed parent birds, by walking around the area and moving away quickly, so the parents can return.

Worth The Long Trip

some birds such as whinchat, cuckoo and nightjar migrate over 2000 miles from their over-wintering sites in Africa to arrive on Exmoor's moorland from April and spend the summer here to breed.



Birds of Prey

Kestrel - familiar hovering falcon, with a long tail and pointed wings. Declining nationally and 50% drop in numbers recorded on Exmoor from 2008 to 2014.



Steve Knoll (rspb-images.com)



Merlin - Small, fast falcon, about the size of a blackbird and almost extinct as a breeding species on Exmoor. The males are a striking blue colour.

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Buzzard - large bird of prey, with broad wings and a mewing call. Predominantly brown but variable in colour and can be very pale, especially on the breast. Can be seen ranging over the moor, occasionally hovering or sitting on a post or tree top.



Ben Hall (rspb-images.com)



Peregrine - breeding on sea cliffs peregrines can often be seen hunting over the moor especially near the coast.

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Hobby - summer visitors, similar in colour to a peregrine, but more slender with long pointed wings and with characteristic 'red trousers'. It uses its talons to catch prey such as dragonflies and transfer to its beak in flight.



David Tipling (rspb-images.com)



Hen harrier - occasional visitor to the moor in winter or summer. They fly low over the moors, the males being silvery grey with black wing tips, the females predominantly brown, both have a white rump.

Andy May (rspb-images.com)

Red kite - occasional visitor in spring and summer and has attempted to breed. Characterised, and almost unmistakable, by its forked tail and reddish brown body and white patches under its outer wings.



Ben Hall (rspb-images.com)

Where to find out more

For further information on Exmoor's moorland birds contact:

Exmoor National Park Authority
Exmoor House

Dulverton, Somerset, TA22 9HL

Telephone: 01398 323665

www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk

info@exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

SW England Regional Office

4th floor (north block)

Broadwalk House

Southernhay West

Exeter, Devon, EX1 1TS

Telephone: 01392 432691

www.rspb.org.uk

Registered charity no. 207079

Devon Birds

www.devonbirds.org

Somerset Ornithological Society

www.somersetbirds.net

The Birds of Exmoor and the Quantocks,
David K Ballance and Brian D Gibbs (2003)

Front cover: Cuckoo, John Bridges (rspb-images.com)



Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund
through the Heart of Exmoor Scheme.



Moorland birds of Exmoor National Park

Identification Guide

Key: 450 Estimated number of breeding birds on Exmoor's moorland in 2014



Increasing



Stable



Decreasing

Please note: illustrations not to scale.

450 Lesser redpoll ↑

Usually associated with open woodland or young plantations, on Exmoor they also occupy very tall gorse. They are tiny finches, related to linnets, and are brown and streaky with a patch of red on the head (or 'poll') and a noticeable pale wing bar.



Steve Knell (rspb-images.com)

1100 Linnet ↑

Occupy taller vegetation on the moor, especially areas of heather and gorse. Males can be recognised by their chestnut back, grey head and reddish breast.



RSPB (rspb-images.com)

265 Whitethroat ↑

Summer visitors which favour areas of scrub and are particularly numerous along the coast. They have a fairly long tail; males have a 'scratchy' song, rusty coloured wings, grey head, and a very striking white throat.



John Bridges (rspb-images.com)

120 Yellowhammer ↑

Localised in their distribution, occupying the fringes of the moorland around Dunkery, Molland, West Anstey and Winsford Hill. The males have a vivid yellow head and underparts and are chestnut brown on the back.



Tony Marshall (rspb-images.com)

4000 Skylark ↑

The second most numerous species on Exmoor's moorland, occupying the hill tops and plateaus. They are easily recognisable from their glorious song as they hover high overhead.



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

550 Whinchat →

Summer visitors, their numbers are relatively stable despite national declines. They are often associated with areas of taller vegetation, bracken and wetter parts of the moor. They are similar in appearance to stonechats but males have a striking white eye brow (rather than a neck band), black cheeks and orange breast.



Steve Knell (rspb-images.com)

0 Ring ouzel ↓

Otherwise known as the 'mountain blackbird', they last bred in 2002 on steep heather clad slopes. Since then birds are seen on spring and autumn passage only. Similar to a blackbird but with a white 'bib' it may still be possible to see them feeding in grassy areas in the spring, or on berries in the autumn.



Andy May (rspb-images.com)

17 Wheatear ↓

Summer visitors that prefer short vegetation. Males are slate grey on the back with black face mask and wings and all have a distinctive white rump when they fly.



Nigel Blake (rspb-images.com)

179 Grasshopper warbler ↓

Summer visitors and have been increasing on Exmoor over recent decades. This species is very difficult to see, but can be recognised by its continuous, insect-like, reeling song which is most noticeable at dusk and dawn.



Mike Richards (rspb-images.com)

400 Reed bunting ↑

Occupy areas of long, wet grassland or deep heather. The males can be recognised in summer by their striking black head and white collar as they sing from perches on the top of scrub.



Mike Richards (rspb-images.com)

21 Snipe ↑

Secretive wading birds with long beaks, but can be heard 'drumming' (or 'willowing') or 'chipping' at dawn or dusk in spring. Breeding numbers are low due to limited valley mire habitat, but restoration work under the Exmoor Mires project has helped boost numbers. Numbers are much higher in winter and can be frequently flushed from wet areas of the moor.



Andy May (rspb-images.com)

6 Curlew ↓

In steep decline nationally, the future of curlews on Exmoor is uncertain. They occupy mires and heaths and are easy to recognise being large birds with a long curved bill and an evocative whistling call.



Andy May (rspb-images.com)

131 Cuckoo ↑

Iconic summer visitors doing well on Exmoor despite steep national declines. Easily recognised by its well known call, the cuckoo is dove sized, predominantly grey in colour and has a long tail giving it a falcon-like appearance.



John Bridges (rspb-images.com)

152 Redstart ↑

Summer visitors often associated with woodland. On Exmoor's moorland they are found on the transition between the woods and the moors. They are beautiful birds males are slate grey on the back and bright orange on the front with a black face. They often quiver their bright red/orange tails.



David K (rspb-images.com)

1000 Willow warbler ↑

Summer visitors associated with trees on the moorland. Willow warblers are similar in appearance to the chiffchaff with greenish back and yellow washed chest and are best separated by their distinctive delicate song that descends down the scale.



John Bridges (rspb-images.com)

178 Tree pipit →

Summer visitors, their numbers are relatively stable on Exmoor's moorland. Tree pipits are very similar in appearance to meadow pipits and also perform a parachuting display flight, but often landing on the same song perch tree.



Tony Marshall (rspb-images.com)

50 Nightjar →

Occupy heathland areas and areas of young plantation on Exmoor. Nightjars are nocturnal birds and the males have a very distinctive churring song that can be heard after dusk or pre-dawn. With pointed wings and long tails their shape is similar to a kestrel or cuckoo. They have a silent, jerky flight when the distinctive white patch in the wings and tail of the male are visible.



Andy May (rspb-images.com)

100 Grey wagtail ↑

A colourful resident bird of Exmoor's rivers, these long tailed, vibrant birds, though grey on the back, can sometimes be mistaken for a yellow wagtail by the inexperienced eye as the males have a particularly bright yellow belly.



Ian Grier

24 Dipper ↑

Dippers occupy the rivers of Exmoor all year round. These endearing birds can feed underwater, are dark brown and plumpish with a white front and are characterised by their dipping or bobbing action as they stand on the stones in the rivers.



Tony Marshall (rspb-images.com)

Kingfisher

Despite their unmistakable appearance, kingfishers are probably under-recorded on Exmoor although are found on most rivers and streams. They can be seen all year round.



John Bridges (rspb-images.com)

6500

Meadow pipit ↑

The most numerous species on Exmoor's moorland. They are small, brown birds with a pale breast and dark streaking, occupying heather and grass moor.

Tony Marshall (rspb-images.com)



960

Stonechat ↑

Easily recognised in heather and gorse areas as they perch on top of bushes and sprigs. Look out for the striking black head, white neck markings and bright reddish breast of the male and listen for the distinctive call which sounds like two stones being rubbed together.

Ian Wall (rspb-images.com)



24

Dartford warbler ↓

Colonised Exmoor in the 1990s, increasing rapidly to 197 birds in 2008, but subsequent cold winters saw numbers plummet. They rely on thick, bushy gorse and can be difficult to spot, but listen out for their scratchy song and look for the reddish-brown chest, blue-grey head and long tail that is often cocked.

Ian Wall (rspb-images.com)

