

Invasion of the Berry Breakers



Male Hawfinch, Godmersham by Johnathan Boyce Leigh

It can hardly have escaped the attention of anyone interested in birds that we have experienced an unprecedented influx of Hawfinches into southern England this winter. Although the bulk of arrivals were recorded in late autumn, it is apparent that substantial numbers have arrived in many areas, Kent not the least. In particular, a very obliging group around Godmersham Church provided many people with their first opportunities to see this superb species and resulted in a prodigious output of photographs of varying quality.

I do wonder how many of the people attending the Godmersham site really appreciate how rare an event this has been, or indeed how elusive, shy and difficult to find they normally tend to be?? Many will probably never see another one! It is clear that wintering groups were present in a number of other sites, as the recent reports compiled by Chris Hindle shows, but for my part I was curious about the extent of the arrival, and whether there were many birds in other, less accessible places. The short answer is, yes, there were some small groups, often with other finches, in patches of deciduous woodland, but it took a great deal of effort to locate them, and they provided no opportunities for photographs, though I did manage a few sketches! This suggests that there were others about than just the large, headline grabbing groups, so where had they all come from?

It is clear that they came from the continent; odd birds and groups recorded coming in at Sandwich and Pegwell Bays as well as elsewhere. Also, a number of records of birds passing over watchpoints in the Stour Valley, and similar observations on other east coast counties in England, with numbers of birds recorded as far west as Pembrokeshire quite early in the winter., many in poor physical condition. However, a quick look at the BTO Migration Atlas shows a pitiful array of ringing recoveries either too or from the continent. Further investigation shows that over much of their range in Europe Hawfinches are pretty sedentary, though given to sporadic wanderings in search of food in winter.

The classic monograph on the species "The Hawfinch" by Guy Mountfort is now sixty-one years old and much has changed in the European environment in that time. However, it seems that even when the species was much more common than today, the bulk of the European population was focused in Eastern Europe, and that their winter wanderings took many birds south into northern Italy and the Balkans. Mountfort also records that the Russian population was considered to be truly migratory, moving south and west into similar areas of central Europe.

What we experienced this winter has many of the hallmarks of an 'irruption', a term we more often associate with Waxwings or Crossbills. This is a situation where a widespread crop failure of some significant food plant causes large numbers of birds to make sustained flights in search of suitable resources. Hawfinches are predominantly seed eaters, although like many finches they rear their young on a largely insect diet. In Britain they are most frequently

associated with Hornbeam, Beech and Yew trees, although they have been regarded as pests of garden pea crops and of Cherry and Plum orchards, the low level of the British population and modern cultivation methods make this a less likely source of contention these days. Given that Mountfort records them eating the seeds of fifty-five species of plants it seems odd that so many birds seem to have been affected by a 'widespread crop failure', both Crossbills and Waxwing tend to show a much more restricted range of dietary options. It will be intriguing to see if any of the birds trapped and ringed this winter give us a clue to their origins in the coming summer, should they make a successful return journey.



Female Hawfinch, Godmersham by Tim Gutsell

This raises another interesting consideration; in an irruption of this kind there will be a good number of adult birds involved in a more extreme version of their normal winter wanderings. It is quite likely that many of these birds will successfully re-orientate to their home range come the spring. However, it is also equally likely that amongst the flocks will be first-winter birds undergoing what amounts to an extended 'post-juvenile dispersal'. In this case, it is normal for juveniles to settle in suitable habitat and recruit to, or establish, a local population. Large scale influxes of Hawfinches have been recorded in the past but have not been frequent.

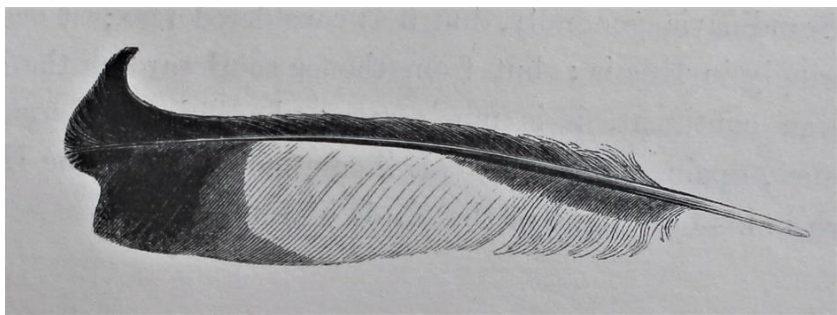
Through time the species has been variously recorded as both 'scarce' and 'widespread' by different writers in the last 200 years. It is just possible that the British population has never been entirely self-sustaining and has to some extent depended on influxes such as the one we have seen this winter, to re-establish the population in some areas. If that is the case, then we might expect to see a bit of an upsurge in records through the coming summer, but it is fair to say that the Hawfinch is a damnably difficult bird to prove breeding and as a Schedule 1 species, should not be subjected to any unnecessary disturbance during the breeding season.



Male Hawfinch, Godmersham, March by Johnathan Boyce Leigh

Hawfinches are fairly easy to sex given a good view; the male is more brightly coloured and has purple-black outer webs to its secondary feathers. By contrast, the female is rather paler and more 'washed-out' and has the outer webs of the secondaries pale grey, giving a rather obvious pale panel on the closed wing, easily visible in Tim Gutsells photo above. It is generally not possible to age Hawfinches after the post-juvenile moult in late summer although some may show a moult limit, but at the onset of the breeding season both sexes develop a striking steel grey bill. The March photo by Johnathan Boyce Leigh shows the beginning of this colour change.

Finally, all these fine photos show the rather odd arrangement of the tips of the secondary feathers on the folded wing. This is due to the somewhat bizarre shape of the feather tips, likened to being like a billhook. There are seldom useful photos of these sort of features, but in Yarrell's "History of British Birds" published in 1848, there is a great engraving of one, reproduced below.



References

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