



# NATURAL HIGH

Beginner's Birding &  
Wellbeing Guide



Created by Lucy Stevens  
in collaboration with  
the National Forest

# CONTENTS

The National Forest	pg. 1
Where to birdwatch	pg. 2
Birds you can see and hear	pg. 4
How to identify birds	pg. 5
The Countryside Code	pg. 6
Birds and wellbeing	pg. 8
Mindfulness meditation	pg. 10
Birds of conservation concern	pg. 12
Taking photos of birds	pg. 14
How you can help	pg. 16
Acknowledgements	pg. 17

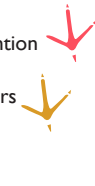
## Bird Conservation Status

In this guide bird footprints are used to represent each species conservation status.

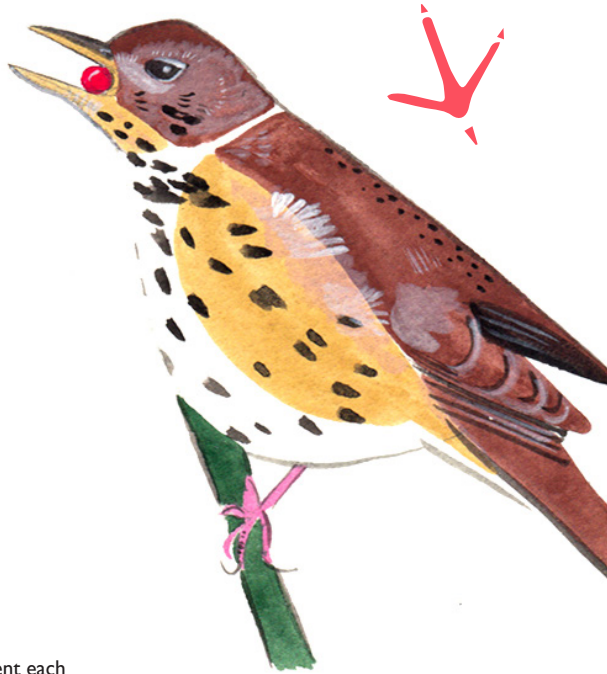
Red demonstrates those that need urgent attention

Amber shows a moderate decline in recent years

Green is the least critical group.



Above: The songthrush likes to eat snails which it breaks by smashing against a stone.



Right: The great spotted woodpecker has a very distinctive bouncing flight and spends most of its time clinging to tree trunks, calling loudly or putting on a 'drumming' display in spring.



# THE NATIONAL FOREST

The National Forest is one of the UK's boldest environmentally led regeneration initiatives in the country, spanning 200 square miles of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire. The central part of the Forest covers the former Midlands Coalfield, and the planting of nine million trees over the past three decades has transformed the landscape from black to green.

But the story of the National Forest goes beyond the trees, to one of imaginative and ambitious sustainable development. Working with local communities, businesses and landowners, the Forest demonstrates it is possible to grow a positive future together.

[nationalforest.org](http://nationalforest.org)



# WHERE TO BIRDWATCH

Here are the top ten National Forest sites in Leicestershire recommended by birders.

Beacon Hill Country Park

Bradgate Park

Hicks Lodge

Kelham Bridge Nature Reserve

Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Wood

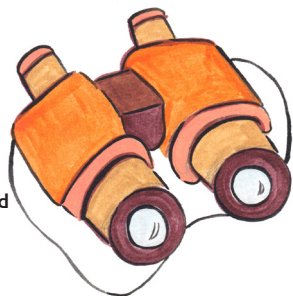
Sence Valley Forest Park

Swithland Wood

The Outwoods

Thornton Reservoir

Willesley Wood



Over: The nuthatch eats insects, hazel nuts, acorns and beechmast. Look for nuthatches around the ancient oak trees at Bradgate Park.

This page: Robins sing nearly all year round. They are aggressively territorial and are quick to drive away intruders.



# BIRDS YOU CAN SEE AND HEAR

These birds are on the least critical list for conservation



# HOW TO IDENTIFY BIRDS

Be patient

Keep still and quiet - wait for the birds to come to you

Watch and listen keenly to learn their calls and songs

Binoculars are helpful but you don't have to have them

Enjoy the moment and don't be afraid to make mistakes

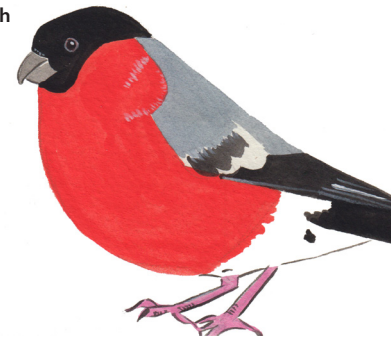
Ask for help from other birdwatchers

Try visiting at different times, early mornings are best

Start with the common garden birds

Look at size and colour to help with identification

Have fun!



Right: The male bullfinch has a bright pinkish-red breast and cheeks.

# THE COUNTRYSIDE CODE

## Respect everyone

Leave gates and property as you find them.

Be nice, say hello, share the space.

## Protect the environment

Take your litter home - leave no trace of your visit.

Always keep dogs under control and in sight.

Care for nature - do not cause damage or disturbance.

## Enjoy the outdoors

Plan your adventure - know what to expect and what you can do.

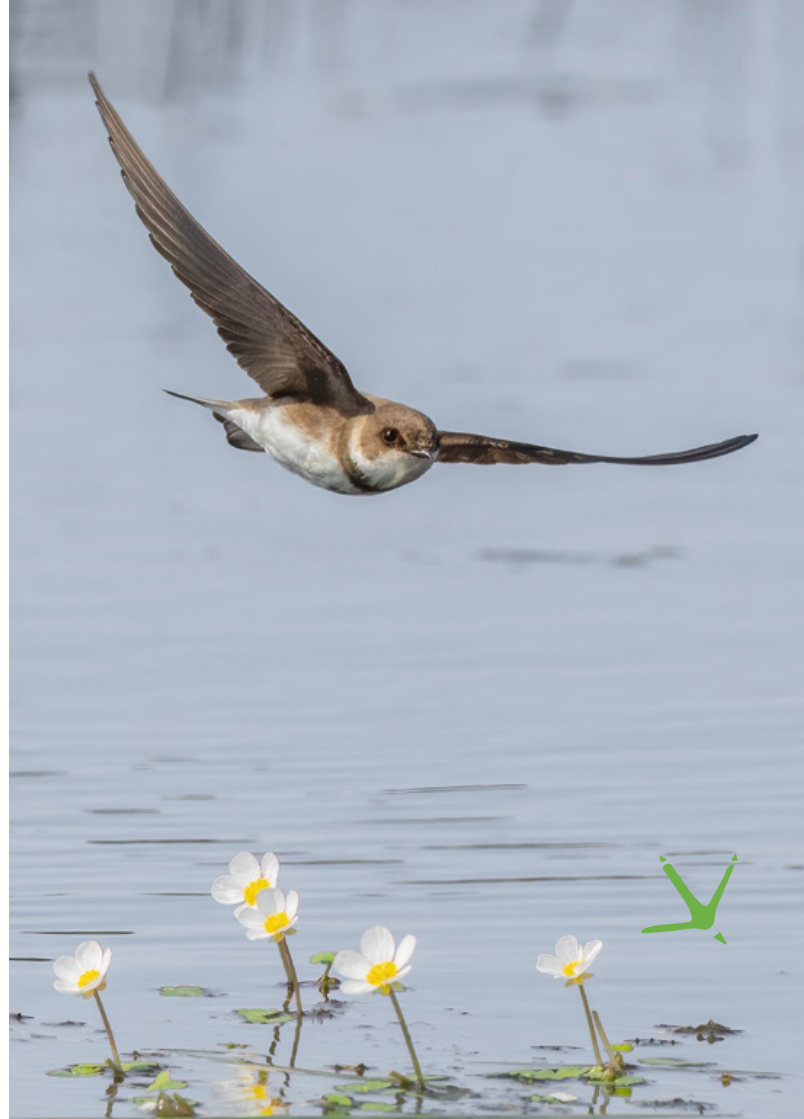
Enjoy your visit, have fun, make a memory.



Right: In the past 50 years the European population of sand martins has crashed twice as a result of drought in the birds' African wintering grounds.

Sandmartins can be seen at Hicks Lodge from February, at the specially built sandmartin wall.

Left: The skylark has a small crest, which can be raised when the bird is excited or alarmed. It is renowned for its complex song and display flight, vertically up in the air.



# BIRDS AND WELLBEING

How birdwatchers describe their experience of being outdoors in nature.

Developing listening skills

Grounding

Relaxing

Happy

Connected with nature

Enjoy identifying wildlife

Love hearing birdsong

Makes my heart sing

Lifts my spirits

Calming



Right: Kingfishers fly rapidly, low over water, and hunt fish from riverside perches. They are vulnerable to hard winters and habitat degradation through pollution. Kingfishers are frequently spotted on the River Sence and at Kelham Bridge Nature Reserve.

Right: Jays are shy but you might see them burying acorns in autumn for later in the winter. They are frequently seen at Willesley Woods and Hicks Lodge.



# MINDFULNESS MEDITATION



1. Wherever you are, pause and allow your eyes to gently close or allow your gaze to soften and let your focus come to rest on the ground in front of you.
2. Take a moment to feel where your body is in contact with the surface beneath you; feet on the ground, or legs on the chair. Just notice.
3. Try to tune in to your natural flow of breath - observing the in and the out. You don't need to do anything, in fact try not to change it in any way. Just notice.
4. Notice where you feel your breath in your body. It might be in your abdomen, your chest, throat, or in your nostrils. Try to feel the sensations of breath, one breath at a time.
5. Each time you find your attention wandering, gently re-focus your attention back onto the meditation.
6. After a few moments, begin to shift the focus of your attention to outside of the body and start to allow the sounds around you to filter in.
7. What do you hear? Start with listening to the sounds furthest from you, then start to bring your attention closer.
8. Try to shift your focus gradually, pausing for a moment each time, until you're listening to just the sounds in your immediate vicinity.

9. Return the focus of your awareness to the breath. See if you can pay attention to the physical sensations that are occurring in your body right now as you breathe.

10. Allow your eyes to gently open and the light to filter in. You have completed your listening meditation. How did you find it?

*Emma-Jane Bunn is a Yoga and Mindfulness Meditation teacher based in South-East London.*

*@emmabunnyyoga*



Above: Along with the firecrest, the goldcrest is the UK's smallest bird.

# BIRDS OF CONSERVATION CONCERN

The UK's birds can be split into three categories of conservation importance - red, amber and green.

Below are birds that are currently on the red list (highest conservation priority, with species needing urgent action) and amber list (birds with population decline and rare breeders).



Top row from left to right: Yellowhammer, kingfisher, mute swan  
Bottom row from left to right: starling, tawny owl and mallard



Red kite: This magnificently graceful bird of prey has a reddish-brown body, angled wings and deeply forked tail. It was saved from extinction by one of the world's longest running protection programmes. Red kites can be seen soaring over Charnwood.





# TAKING PHOTOS OF BIRDS

## Bird Photography Top Tips

### Using a mobile phone

Try to get on the same level as the birds

Have the sun behind you

Find a place that has an uncluttered background

Don't chase the birds. Stay still and let them come to you

Use a hide on a reserve to get closer to birds

Don't give up!

### Using a digital SLR camera

All of the above tips plus:

Keep your shutter speed as high as possible

Use a tripod for better quality images

Use a wide aperture

Buy the longest lens you can afford

Right: Tawny owls in the UK are mainly reddish brown above and paler underneath. They breed widely in England, Wales and Scotland but are not found in Ireland. You can hear them in the mature woods of Swithland Wood and the Outwoods.



Above: The goldfinch has a liquid twittering song and call. Their long fine beaks allow them to extract seeds from thistles and teasels.



## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Fill your garden or balcony with native plants and avoid chemical pesticides

Stop your cat from catching birds

Install a bird box and put up a bird feeder

Feed birds seeds, fruit or nuts. Not bread - it's junk food!

Provide birds with water to drink and bathe in

Make your windows bird-safe, add stickers or feeders to your window to prevent them from flying into the glass

Clean up litter. Birds get tangled in it or can feed it to their young with devastating consequences

Take your family and friends birding to spark a new interest in nature

Become a Citizen Scientist

Join the Big Garden Birdwatch with RSPB

Count birds using online tools with the British Trust for Ornithology

Help to record local wildlife with Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society and Naturespot



Below: Noisy and gregarious, the UK house sparrow population declined by 71% between 1977 and 2008.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the volunteers that have contributed, including Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society and Naturespot for providing valuable input into this guide including the best locations to visit for birdwatching, bird identification tips, and for sharing how birdwatching makes you feel.



Thank you to:

Emma-Jane Bunn for writing the mindfulness meditation guide. [bunnyoga.co.uk](http://bunnyoga.co.uk)

Martin Vaughan for providing top tips for photographing birds.

BirdLife International for the information on 'How to help birds'. [birdlife.org](http://birdlife.org)

Martin Vaughan, Ian Tidmarsh, David Hicklin and Rodney F Baker for their bird photography.

The above photographers plus Naturespot for inspiring illustrations of birds. [naturespot.org.uk](http://naturespot.org.uk)

The RSPB for providing key information and conservation status for each bird. [rspb.org.uk](http://rspb.org.uk)

The Government website for providing information for the Countryside Code. [gov.uk/government/publications/the-country-side-code](http://gov.uk/government/publications/the-country-side-code)

Created, edited and illustrated by Lucy Stevens. [lucystevens.co.uk](http://lucystevens.co.uk)  
Produced in collaboration with the National Forest.  
Funded by a National Forest Arts Grant. [nationalforest.org](http://nationalforest.org)



# NATURAL HIGH

A beginner's birding and wellbeing guide to help you better connect with nature through National Forest sites in Leicestershire.

SUPPORTED BY  THE NATIONAL FOREST

