

My birding experience at Horam Manor Farm

My fascination with birds started in 2014, during a trip around South America. I was blown away by the abundance of tropical looking birds all around me, and so started to keep track of the various species that I'd seen. When I returned to Britain, this fascination continued as I realised just how interesting our native birdlife is.

I have now been birding for around six years and as a regular visitor to Horam Manor Farm, I have got to know its birds quite well. I have been amazed at how many interesting species I have seen during my bird walks around the farm; from vibrant blue kingfishers darting across the fishing ponds, to amazingly well camouflaged woodcocks wintering in the orchard.

Spring

Spring sees the arrival of millions of migratory birds to Britain and Horam Manor Farm plays host to its fair share. Chiffchaffs are the first to arrive. These small brown birds frequent the woodlands and hedgerows and announce their arrival with their two-tone song from which they get their name: "*chiff chaff chiff chaff*".

Following in the Chiffchaff's footsteps comes the Blackcap. The Blackcap's song is a world away from the monotonous Chiffchaff's, and it is sometimes referred to as the March Nightingale, reflecting its rich and varied warble.

Both of these spring arrivals can be heard around the farm on a sunny spring morning, but I've found them in their highest densities in the overgrown scrubby areas of the orchard.

The bird song around the farm reaches its peak in late spring, perfectly coinciding with the bluebells coming into bloom across the farm's woodlands.



Chiffchaff and Blackcap

Summer

Swallows and House Martins plucking insects from the air over the fields and Swifts flying high above the farm buildings. Summer brings a more relaxed birding experience.

The hedgerows are well worth investigating this time of year as many species use these to build their nests in. I always make an effort to investigate the blackthorn-rich

hedges that cut through the solar farm as these can occasionally have Bullfinches in them this time of year.



The male Bullfinch is arguably one of Britain's best-looking birds

Autumn

As the days begin to shorten, our summer migrants leave for warmer climes. However, these are replaced with birds coming from Scandinavia and eastern Europe to take advantage of the relatively mild British winter. On clear Autumn evenings and mornings, Redwings can be seen flying over the farm in large numbers. On one late-October morning, I counted over 100 birds pass above me in under an hour.

These winter thrushes are joined in November by their slightly larger cousin, the Fieldfare. These two species overwinter on the farm and can be seen along the field margins where they feed in the short grass, insect rich from horse manure.



Redwing and Fieldfare

Late autumn is also when the farm's large population of Tawny Owls begin to call. As the sun sets, listen out for the familiar "twit twoo" coming from the woodlands. Seeing them, however, is a whole other matter as they only leave their daytime roosting places under the cover of darkness.

Winter

Winter is my favourite time of year to look for birds around the farm. Birds are very active this time of year as they try to make the most of the few hours of daylight, and

some very interesting and elusive species make Horam Manor Farm their home for the winter months.

Three years ago, while walking through the orchard, an explosion of rusty-brown feathers took off from beneath my feet and twisted through the trees and into the woodland. I had flushed a Woodcock. These birds live in Britain year-round, but their numbers increase dramatically in winter as birds from mainland Europe come here to escape the worst of the cold. I assume this bird is one of these as I have encountered it every winter in the orchard, never seeing it until the last moment when it betrays its camouflage and takes off just before I walk into it.



The camouflage of the Woodcock can make it incredibly difficult to see amongst the leaf litter

Like the Woodcock, many other species of birds move around during winter to find the food they need to keep them warm. Kingfishers are one of these species and I have been fortunate to catch a few glimpses of a birds during winter as they zip across the fishing ponds, their electric blue unmistakable among the drab colours of winter.

In addition to birds that regularly extend their range during winter, some species 'erupt' as the food in their home ranges runs out and they are forced to fly, in huge numbers, to find food further afield. This occurred in the winter of 2017-18 when, following the failure of seed crops in Central Europe, thousands of Hawfinches made their way to Britain.

On Christmas Eve 2017, I was walking around the farm when I saw the unmistakable short-tailed, massive-beaked shape of a hawfinch on the top of one of the trees in the woodland. This bird then dropped down into a hedge where I found another four birds feeding. To this day, this remains my only sighting of this incredibly elusive bird in Britain.



Hawfinch

Although it may not be immediately obvious, Horam Manor Farm is full of bird life. You just need to grab a pair of binoculars and go for a walk.