

This walk is best in spring or early summer because many of the birds on route are summer visitors.

Milford Common:

This is the best common for warblers such as Blackcap and Garden Warbler. They are small grey sparrow-sized birds, whose warbling songs are very similar and both prefer scrub. However, as its name implies, the Blackcap male can be identified by its black crown. The female has a brown crown. If you spot small birds with white rumps flying away they are Bullfinches. Nightingales were present on this common in the past and there has been extensive layering of the hawthorn to encourage their return.

Witley Common:

The southern end of the common has some heathland specialities. The Dartford Warbler, which can be very skulking, sometimes perches on gorse or heather with its long tail cocked. The Woodlark looks very like a Skylark but it is much scarcer. It sings most in March and April and many birdwatchers consider its haunting liquid song to be the most beautiful of all our birdsong. The Stonechat is a small pugnacious bird that often perches prominently and calls persistently. The male is a handsome black, white and red but the female is much duller. The Yellowhammer is a bit like a yellowish sparrow and its song is sometimes described as 'a little bit of bread and no cheese'. The Tree Pipit is a small brown bird that likes the top of trees. It flies upwards singing before descending in a parachute flight and giving a characteristic 'seeer seeer' call.

Anywhere:

Woodland birds such as Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Goldcrest and Jay. Coal Tits and Goldcrests prefer coniferous woodland and are best looked for in Scots Pines (earlier in the year you may be lucky enough to spot Crossbills in these trees). Other birds include the Chiffchaff, a small greyish-green warbler which sings its own name, and the very similar Willow Warbler, which is common in Birch and has a rather sad falling song. If you hear a plaintive mewing, look upwards; there will be a Buzzard somewhere in the sky above

Directions

From the car park walk back towards the main road and take the footpath left by the noticeboard onto Milford Common and then join a path coming in from the left by a pink Heathland Hike (HH) marker . At the first fork go right and at the T-junction turn right following the (HH) and Permissive Bridleway (PB) sign. The path enters a wooded area and shortly, at a crossroad of paths, leave the HH/PB, which goes left, and keep straight ahead. Further on the path bears to the left and runs parallel with the A286, a few yards to your right. Ignore crossing paths.

The path continues through hawthorn thickets formed by earlier extensive layering. The path curves left, leaves the hawthorn thickets and skirts a patch of woodland on your right. At a T-junction turn left to reach a HH/PB sign at an open area. Take the right fork following the HH/PB signs. After a short while there is a wooded area to the left with further Hawthorn thickets in front of it. You then arrive at a junction of paths including a broad path which comes in from the right and curves away to the left.

This is the area where Nightingales were to be found in the past. If they should return the best time to hear them is late April, when only the males have arrived and they often sing from exposed perches. They sing most in the early morning and late evening. When the females arrive, the males usually sing from deep cover. It doesn't matter too much if you don't see one – their brown plumage does not match the beauty of their song.

Cross the broad path and take the narrower path straight ahead and swinging left. Soon you reach a fork and, taking the right hand option, with pink HH marker, continue on this path until you arrive at a metalled road – Webb Road. Cross over to the bridleway. This area can be wet and muddy in winter. Continue straight ahead through an area of Oaks and then mixed woodland.

This is the best area for Coal Tits and Goldcrests.

After approximately half a mile arrive at a crossroads and a post with marker HH to left, PB sign to right.

You can make a short detour left here onto the old wartime parade ground to see if there are any Green Woodpeckers feeding on the ground. They will be going for the ants which make up a large part of their diet.

Resuming the walk, continue ahead along unmarked path through woodland. Path swings left and rejoins HH route at a waymarked post. Turn right here where the path begins to skirt a fence on the left.

The fence was erected by the NT to allow grazing by Highland Cattle in an effort

to restore the heath by trampling the bracken and grazing the birch seedlings but the cattle grazing has now been discontinued.

The path enters a patchwork of woodland, rough grassland and heather, still following the fence on the left. In places, during the summer when the bracken is up, the fence is not visible all of the time. The path swings right and, at a junction, turn left, following the HH sign. The path passes through an area of saplings, which can be wet and muddy in winter. The path reaches a crossroads by a gate where the fence swings off to the left. Keep straight ahead, following the HH sign.

Now the path turns more sandy and passes mature pine trees on the right and saplings on the left. When the main path narrows slightly and swings right, take a narrow path to the left, leaving the pink HH route, into a more open common area, largely covered with heather.

This is the best area for the heathland birds described above. It is also a good spot to visit at dusk on a warm mid-summer evening for two other interesting birds. One is the Nightjar, a largish bird that flies at dusk and at night, lives on insects, and is the source of many superstitions. Its song is quite unforgettable, a far-carrying steady churring sound that changes abruptly in pitch from time to time. The other bird is the Woodcock, a wading bird that feeds at dusk, and can be seen patrolling its territory in regular circular flights called roding; its calls make it sound rather like a flying frog! The heather is splendid in August.

At a T junction turn left, rejoining the pink HH route for a short distance. Ignore the next pink HH sign to right and continue ahead to a T-junction where the path returns close to the enclosure fence. Go right here and follow the line of the fence once more. When the fence turns to the left, watch carefully for a narrow path to the left and follow this, through bracken and heather at first and then through an area of saplings, with fence still on you left.

This section is narrow in places and can be very wet after heavy rain.

Eventually, at the crossroads where the fence goes away to the left, keep straight ahead, crossing a wider path. Continue straight ahead, ignoring path to right and keep ahead at a further crossroads. Arriving at a T-junction turn right and immediately keep left at the fork. Keep on this path, passing through a woodland play area, and turn left, along a wider path, which shortly swings right, passing wooden posts with animal carvings, and returns to Webb Road and the car park.

