

Have you ever heard or seen a Nightjar?

If you have lived in Pembrokeshire all your life it is very unlikely that you have, unless you have made a special effort to do so. They are mostly distributed in the south of England and the midlands, and in north Wales where their favoured habitat of lowland heath is available.



They are almost impossible to see during the daytime – their camouflage is extraordinary and almost perfectly matches the bracken, twiggy ground on which they lay their eggs. The only way to “see” them is to “hear” them – their regular churring song at dusk is quite unlike anything else (except an outboard engine!) We have been lucky during our lives in that we have twice lived where nightjars were regularly breeding – once on the Berkshire Heaths near Newbury and once on Cannock Chase, where our temporary accommodation in a holiday chalet, immediately after getting married, was within walking distance of churring nightjars.

So why I am writing this in a Pembrokeshire newsletter? Well, because Nightjars have recently returned to breed in Pembrokeshire. There are perhaps 3 current sites and one site this year had 3 singing males and a juvenile was observed. This is excellent news – it is good to have this charismatic bird breeding in the area again. Here is some more information from the RSPB about nightjars:

Are Nightjars endangered?

Nightjars were once much more common and widespread than today. The loss of open woodland and heathland to forestry, agriculture and development caused numbers to dramatically fall by 51% across the UK between 1972 and 1992. But more recently numbers have begun to recover. This is partly because of successful conservation efforts to restore lowland heath but also the felling of commercial forests which has produced large areas of suitable open habitat.

Nightjar myths

The Nightjar is known by many names – the Fern Owl, the Wheeler, the Nightchurr and the Dor-Hawk. But the oddest is surely the Goatsucker. Long ago it was thought Nightjars would drink milk directly from goats, poisoning them so their udders wasted away and they went blind. The myth was once common in many countries all over Europe, not just in the UK.

The truth is less dramatic. Nightjars were probably coming close to the livestock because they were hunting the many insects close by.

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