

Christmas Crossbills

GARY FARMER



Two-barred Crossbill, Postensplain

Phil Parsons

On a bright morning in December members of the Wyre Forest Study Group met up for their Christmas Crossbills walk. It has to be said that naming a walk 'Christmas Crossbills' fourteen months in advance is a very brave thing to do as these birds are unpredictable at best. But the leaders for the walk had done their homework and carried out a pre-walk reconnaissance and were very hopeful that they would deliver on the day.

So twenty one members of the study group set off from Postensplain car park on the festive forest foray in search of Wyre's wonderful winter wildlife. The group walked down towards the conifer plantations when the first bird of the day was spotted and amazingly enough we couldn't believe our mince-pies as it was a fine male Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* sitting high on top of a pine tree like a star on top of a Christmas tree. It perched obligingly for a minute or two giving everyone good views of this wonderful, salmon-pink bird. This would have been a remarkable start to any walk, spotting the target species almost straight away but the star was still to shine that day.

A few Siskins *Carduelis spinus* flew overhead during the walk through the conifers, a Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* called from a group of larch trees and then the sound of a large group of Crossbills could be heard ahead. Just round the next bend a small group of birders had gathered, lined up along the path all scanning the trees where a mixed flock of Crossbills, Lesser Redpolls *Carduelis cabaret* and Siskins were feeding. It was not these that the birders were looking for however as

amongst the flock were three (or more) Two-barred Crossbills *Loxia leucoptera*, a 'lifer' for most if not all of the Study Group members and the real stars of the show! And very soon the birds were showing well, 2 males and a female. The Common Crossbill can have white wingbars so some caution was required but these birds had very bold wingbars and white tertial tips; the colour of the male birds was slightly more pink and their call was also very distinctive (a high-pitched toot almost like that of a toy trumpet).

Interestingly the Two-barred Crossbill has a slightly smaller bill than the Common Crossbill which allows it to feed from larch cones but these birds were feeding from pine cones in the mixed flock. This is a very rare visitor to Britain but in exceptional years (when the pine cone crop fails in Russia) large numbers push across Europe and into this country. 2013 was such a year with sightings from various suitable locations so we were incredibly lucky to have been at the right place at the right time. These birds had been spotted by Brett Westwood a few days earlier and the fact they had remained in the area was a real bonus for all.

Eventually the birds moved on so we continued into the valley and up through a strip of mixed woodland to see what else we could find. We soon found a good winter flock of more usual small woodland birds including Great Tit *Parus major*, Coal Tit *Periparus ater*, Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* and Long-tailed Tits *Aegithalos caudatus* as well as Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*. As we walked out into a clearing Crossbills flew over again and settled into the pines to feed. Again we had really good



Wyre Forest Study Group scanning the trees, 7 December 2013

Rosemary Winnall

views of the birds and were able to watch them feeding; using their odd, overlapping bills to prize open cones to get at the seeds inside. Quite often they remove the cones and carry them to a part of the branch where they can manipulate them and hold them tightly with a foot to allow easier access to the seeds. This seems a very wasteful way to feed as only a few seeds are removed before the cone is dropped to the ground.

After watching this flock for a while we moved on again. Our attentions moved to smaller quarry when John Bingham was set the task of finding us a Snow Flea *Boreus hyemalis*; this would be like looking for the proverbial pine needle in Santa's sack. It wasn't long however before John was investigating areas of moss and he exclaimed that he had found a Snow Flea. This tiny insect was quickly collected into a tube for all to see before being released back into the moss (another 'lifer' for certain members of the group). An extraordinary little creature like a cross between a scorpion fly *Panorpa* sp. and a flea Siphonaptera. This one was a

new record for that part of Wyre so further searches in other parts of the forest might be worthwhile.

An unexpected sighting further on the walk was a Red Admiral butterfly *Vanessa atalanta* on the wing (in December)! It flew across the track and began investigating bits of flaking tree bark, presumably looking for somewhere to hibernate.

Our walk was coming to end when we were directed to some interesting fungi by a visiting mycologist. Just into the shade of some deciduous trees was a patch of pale fungus which to the untrained eye looked rather uninteresting. The underside was quite different being made up of hundreds of spines giving it the name of Hedgehog Fungus *Hydnum repandum*.

With things of interest all the way this walk turned out to be a real cracker.

(Ed. Many thanks to Phil Parsons for generously allowing his fabulous photograph of the Two-barred Crossbill to be used).



Wyre Forest Study Group crossbill watching, 7 December 2013

Rosemary Winnall