Birding on the SOUTH DOWNS WAY

A five-day, 100-mile trek on undulating chalk downs, clifftops and ancient forest, is more than just an adventure; it's an education

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDY WASLEY

Views over Cuckmere Haven from the South Downs Way

I make my way down from Old Winchester Hill Fort in darkness. Sunset was two hours ago; the full moon is bright enough to cast shadows, so I make my way through a silent copse with my head torch switched off. The moonlight paints the trees, and the landscape beyond, in silvery hues.

As I near the edge of the treeline, the silence is torn apart by shrieks: a nocturnal cacophony that sets me scrambling for my torch. I switch it on, and its beam just catches something moving high between the treetops. The shrieks subside, and give way to soft hoots and warbles – music after the chaos.

Tawny Owls. Six, maybe seven, startled by my footfall. I catch my breath, turn the torch off, and enjoy the owls' soft calls as they settle. I turn back to the path and continue my hike, chased out of the copse by my moonlight shadow.

My encounter with the Tawny Owls was a high point in my five-day hike along the South Downs Way – a 100-mile footpath spanning the South Downs National Park through Hampshire and Sussex.

The national park takes in ancient woodland, farmland, chalk downs and coastal cliffs, offering a variety of habitats to explore in short visits or – for intrepid souls – as part of a through hike that can take a week or more.

I hiked the full route in early November, carrying my binoculars so that I could make the most of any birding opportunities along the way. The binoculars would prove to be a valuable addition to my usual hiking gear: along the path I enjoyed close-up encounters with winter migrants, raptors, owls, songbirds and corvids – while also learning about the challenges that face the species that make the South Downs their home.

Setting off

I hiked from west to east, starting in Winchester and ending in Eastbourne. The first stage of the route runs through arable land on Winchester's outskirts, standing fallow when I set off: perfect for Rooks, Jackdaws, Carrion Crows and Woodpigeons foraging through stubble in wide furrowed fields. Much of the first day took me through sparse autumnal woodlands that hummed with song: Blackbirds, Robins and Dunnocks in brambles and on rain-slick Beeches, and

A Kestrel, ready for take-off

A Chaffinch singing

Virginia Woolf described the South Downs as, "...too much for one pair of eyes, enough to float a whole population in happiness, if only they would look"

Wrens belting their song from mossy stumps and scrub.

Autumn had dressed the landscape in a palette of russet, red and yellow, but winter's approach had done its part to introduce a few familiar species. Flocks of thrushes were on garrulous show as I made my way through Hampshire. At Chilcomb, just outside Winchester, I heard a Mistle Thrush singing its blue melody from a high, bare tree. I dropped my rucksack by a Hawthorn and paused to enjoy the bird's song, eyeing its plumage through my binoculars – spots as clear as chocolate drops in coffee cream.

The Hawthorn was dotted with bright red berries, and a few darker berries hung from lichen-clad Elders, glistening with raindrops. The Mistle Thrush joined a dozen Redwings and a couple of Fieldfares foraging along the hedgerow above my head, followed closely by a flock of Long-tailed Tits.

I set off again, brushing past a Field Maple that radiated Linnets, and redcurrant-decked hedgerows shivering with Chaffinches and Goldfinches. For a hiker accustomed to charging from A to B, seeing much of the world through a camera viewfinder, I enjoyed the way birding brought new sounds and sights into my days on the trail.

Night changed my experience of this hike, too. I had chosen to hike late in the year, knowing nightfall would see me hiking in darkness, opening the chance that I might encounter nocturnal wildlife. Barely an hour passed after sunset without my hearing Tawny Owls hooting, close at hand or from distant treelines. I heard Little Owls, too, and the shriek of a Barn Owl on Littleton Down, as I stood gazing at Venus, Saturn and Jupiter, framing the full moon in a cloudless sky.

A landscape in flux

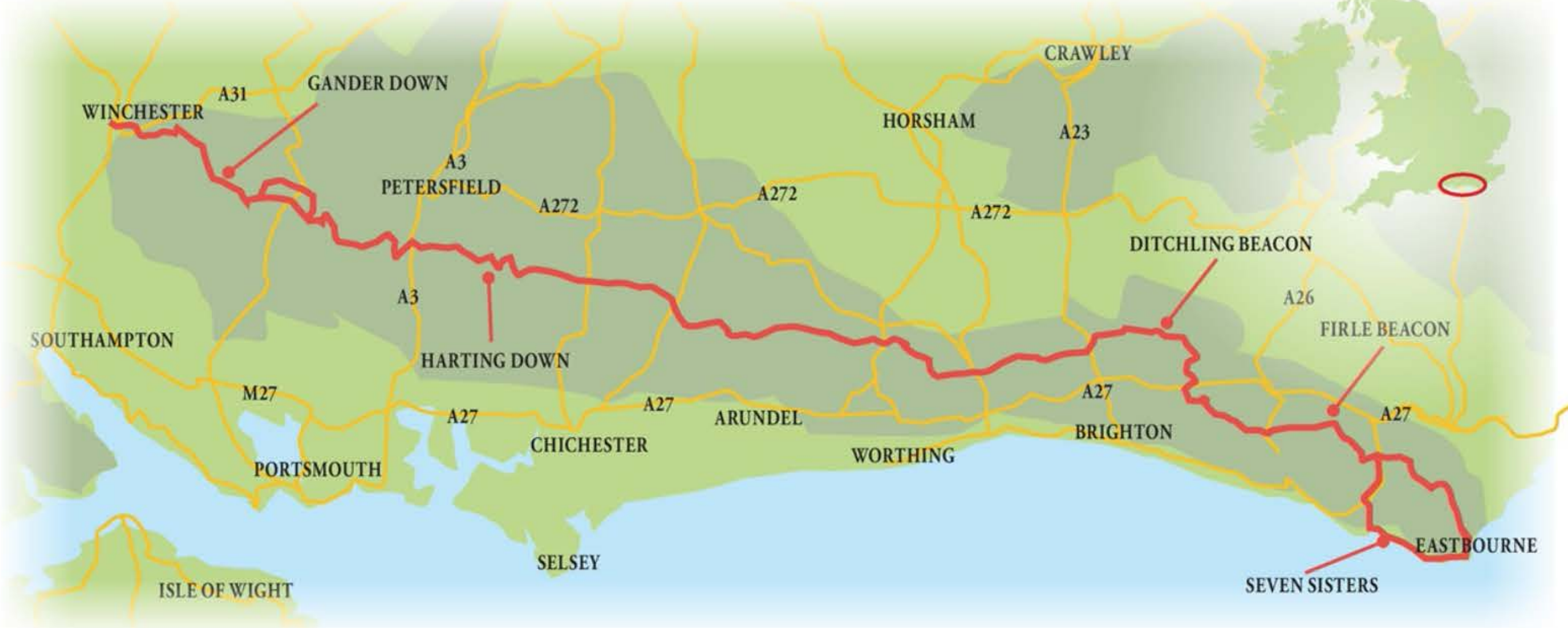
For all that the birds added to my hike, from the day I set foot on the trail, I was conscious of the human impact on the South Downs. This is an intensively farmed region, moulded by thousands of years of human habitation and agriculture. Economic imperatives sometimes seem to outweigh concerns for nature.

Perhaps there is no better evidence for this than in the near-constant sound and sight of male Pheasants along the South Downs Way. Their striking chestnut and deep-green plumage seemed a fitting echo for the late-autumn landscape – but, beauty aside, the more I saw of them, the more I felt stunned by the scale of their presence.

An uncounted number of Pheasants are released into the British countryside every year to be shot. Some estimates put the figure at more than 40 million – a staggering distortion of the avian population, with unassessed impacts on native wildlife and plants.

The South Downs faces a serious natural challenge, too, in the form of Ash dieback – a fungal disease that looks set to kill more than 90% of Britain's native Ash trees. Ash is Britain's second most abundant native tree species, and dieback is already changing the appearance of woodland in the South Downs. On each of my five days, I passed woods where the disease was already present. Dead or dying trees are sorry sights, decked with withered leaves, wounded boughs and skeletal limbs.

The disease's knock-on impact on birds is not yet certain. Ash is an important tree for many species, particularly hole-nesting birds, including woodpeckers, owls and Nuthatches, and for Bullfinches, which feed on the tree's seeds. In the mixed broadleaf woodland typical of the South Downs, there is some hope that other tree species might mitigate Ash dieback's impact on wildlife.



The Cuckmere River as it winds its way down to the English Channel

london camera exchange
ESTABLISHED 1956

5 Star Customer reviews Google
2020 AWARDS
UK STOCK
THE UK'S FAVOURITE PHOTO SPECIALIST
PART EXCHANGE WELCOME

NEW

GREAT VALUE

PROSTAFF P3
Take to the great outdoors with these light, tough binoculars. Perfect for hobbyists and casual explorers, the PROSTAFF P3 make it easy to spot moving animals, birds, and vehicles. Whatever you discover, you'll see it up close and in detail.
• Multilayer coated lenses and prisms ensure a bright and beautiful view
• Rubber armour provides a firm grip and protects from bumps, knocks and drops
• Waterproof and a fog-free design keep the view clear no matter what the weather does
• Wide field of view makes it easy to follow your subject
• Long Leye relief making them perfect for glasses wearers
from only £149

PROSTAFF P7
From flying eagles to shy wildlife, a wide field of view and excellent resolution let you catch every movement and see plenty of detail. Even in low light.
from only £199

NEW
Great all-rounder

Monarch M7+ 8x30
Built for the outdoors, these binoculars deliver outstanding optical performance with rich colour distinction, huge +60° apparent field view, and accuracy across the whole frame.
Perfect for everything from mountain climbing and hiking to camping and birdwatching.
£499
LCE RETAIL EXCLUSIVE!

Monarch M5
Feature-rich range that are ideal whether you are locating birds taking flight or searching for nestled-away wildlife. Outstanding image quality every time – never miss a moment!
8x42 ..... £339

Monarch M7
Delivering an apparent field of view of over 60°, dioptre-lock and anti-smudge coating.
8x30 ..... £409
10x30 ..... £429

Prostaff P3
8x30 ..... £149
10x30 ..... £159
8x42 ..... £179

Prostaff P7
8x30 ..... £199
10x30 ..... £219
8x42 ..... £239

27 Stores Nationwide
Binocular specialist centres at:
BATH Cheap St 01225 462234
BRISTOL Park St 0117 927 6185
CHELTENHAM The Promenade 01242 519851
CHESTER Bridge St Row 01244 326531
CHICHESTER Eastgate Sq 01243 531536
COLCHESTER Eld Lane 01206 573444
DERBY Sadler Gate 01332 348644
EXETER Fore St 01392 279024
GLOUCESTER Southgate St 01452 304513
GUILDFORD Tunsgate 01483 504040
HEREFORD Widemarsh St 01432 272655
LEAMINGTON Clarendon Ave 01926 886166
LINCOLN Silver St 01522 514131
LONDON The Strand 0207 379 0200
MANCHESTER Cross St 0161 834 7500
NEWCASTLE High St, Gosforth 0191 213 0060
NORWICH Timber Hill 01603 612537
NOTTINGHAM Pelham St 0115 941 7486
OXFORD New Inn Hall St 01865 410456
PLYMOUTH Cornwall St 01752 664894
PORTSMOUTH Kingswell Path 023 9283 9933
READING Station Rd 0118 959 2149
SOUTHAMPTON High St 023 8022 1597
TAUNTON North St 01823 259955
WINCHESTER The Square 01962 866203
WORCESTER Pump St 01905 22314
Check website for store opening times
AN EMPLOYEE OWNED BUSINESS

Shop 24 hours a day at: www.LCEgroup.co.uk | FREE UK DELIVERY on new online purchases over £100
E. & O. E. Prices quoted include VAT @ 20%. Prices subject to change. Goods subj

The gently rolling South Downs landscape

But as I passed stands of Beech, Field Maple, Sycamore, oak and birch in blazing autumn colours, the tragedy of Ash dieback seemed visibly stark.

Brighter signs

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that the South Downs Way left me feeling maudlin. For all the challenges that were evident as I tracked through the national park, there were moments that left me feeling hopeful for this ancient and beautiful landscape – none more so than the showy circling and mewled calls of Red Kites in the park's western stretches.

Red Kites were hunted to extinction in England in the 1800s, but their reintroduction since the 1990s has been a great conservation success story. In one area of southern England – which includes the South Downs Way as it tracks through northern Hampshire into West Sussex – the population of Red Kites is estimated to have more than doubled over the five years from 2011 to 2016, from about 490 to more than 1,100 individuals – suggesting a local breeding population of around 174 pairs. They were the most abundant raptor species I saw during my hike.

I caught sight of my first Red Kite while I watched a male Kestrel hovering over an area of scrubby heath near Gander Down. The Red Kite soared sedately into view before arcing high over the scrub, its forked tail flicking and twisting as it circled. I scanned the landscape through my binoculars and saw three more sitting on the bare limbs of a Sycamore, 50 or so metres away, and another on the gable end of a red barn, gazing directly at me.

An inquisitive Robin

Less than a mile further along the path, tracking uphill between hedgerows, I jumped as another male Kestrel barrelled low and fast towards me. The Kestrel twisted right, and darted through a gap in the hedgerow, followed closely by three Red Kites; I stepped into the field to see the birds spiralling up before the Kestrel banked left, dropped quickly, and darted out towards a solitary oak tree. By the time I had lost sight of the Kestrel, the kites had abandoned their pursuit, and mounted a wheeling patrol in the sky. These are big, powerful and charismatic raptors, and their abundance lifted my mood.

Beautiful autumn colours on the Downs' woodland

Clifftop encounter

The second half of my hike was marked by a change in the landscape, from Hampshire's tilled fields and tracts of woodland to the

The iconic Seven Sisters cliffs

A Sky Lark at rest

relatively bare chalk downs of Sussex. Of all the bird species I encountered, none marked the changing terrain with as much clarity as the Sky Lark. Early in the hike I saw them – or, more usually, heard them – only occasionally, over wide patches of scrub or heath between wooded areas. But as woodland yielded to open hills north of Lewes, Brighton and Eastbourne, Sky Larks were abundant.

For me, the Sky Lark has always been the hikers' bird, providing a familiar torrent of sound that recalls fine days hiking across moors and dales. Wherever I walked or rested, their song cascaded from the sky, reaffirming their place in my emotional attachment to uplands. But it was a quite different bird that I will always associate with those five days in the South Downs.

On day two, hiking along the edge of a beechwood near Harting Down, I became aware of something that seemed to be following me in the treetops. I stopped, and heard a low, guttural '*cronk*': a Raven, flitting from tree to tree just behind me, calling and muttering. I pressed on to the trig point at Beacon Hill, where I watched the sun setting behind Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight, four miles distant. Another Raven appeared and perched on the trig point, eyeing me and making soft calls.

Ravens are rare in my patch of south London, so I took the opportunity to admire the richness of the bird's vocabulary, and to watch it as it watched me, with the dying sunlight glistening on its glossy plumage.

The Raven's voice echoed in my mind over the next few days. On day five, with just a few miles left to hike, I sat on the Seven Sisters chalk cliffs watching the sun set over the English Channel. Footsore, and sad that most of my adventure lay behind me, I heard a familiar call: another Raven. It perched at the edge of the cliff, perhaps 10 metres away, looking back at me – a coal-black bird framed by rosy light, calling softly for 20 minutes before launching and soaring towards Eastbourne.

The sun had disappeared below the hazy horizon. The moon rose – waning a little now, but still bright enough to silver the rolling Downs. I picked up my kit, leant into the path, and followed the Raven's lead. BW

More info

For more information about the South Downs Way visit the official website: **www.southdowns.gov.uk/south-downs-way/**

The Hawk Conservancy was closely involved in reintroducing Red Kites in southern England. Read about the conservancy's conservation work and research here: **www.hawk-conservancy.org/conservation-research/uk/redkiteecology/**

Follow writer and photographer Andy on Twitter: **@andywasley**

cliftoncameras
The Optical Experts

PREMIUM DEALER

Trinovid HD - Compact, light and rugged

A compact binocular boasting razor-sharp images & superior colour neutrality

8x32 - £740
10x32 - £790
8x42 - £835
10x42 - £849

"With the Trinovid HD you're right up close everywhere and anytime."

www.cliftoncameras.co.uk
E&OE Prices correct at time of print but are subject to change

Call or Live Chat
Mon - Fri 09:00 - 20:00
Sat - Sun 09:00 - 17:30
Visit us Mon - Sat 09:00 - 17:30

Tel. 01453 548128
Email: sales@cliftoncameras.co.uk

Our Pay on Finance and interest-free finance are products provided by Deko.
Anv advertised finance products are always subject to age, status and terms & conditions.
tions visit www.cliftoncameras.co.uk/camera-financing-deko

Clifton Cameras Ltd is registered in England & Wales 5859660. Registered Office: 28 Parsonage Street, Dursley, GL11 4AA. Clifton Cameras Ltd acts as a credit broker and only offers credit products from Deko. Clifton Cameras Ltd is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. Our registration number is 64436. Credit provided subject to age and status.