

# SUSSEX ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY FIRECREST HABITAT SEARCH 2017-2018

There has never been a thorough study of the habitat preferences of breeding Firecrests in Sussex. However, studies in Hampshire in past years (Clements, Ward and Wynn 2017) and a local survey in central Sussex in 2017 suggest that it is probable that most Firecrests in Sussex breed in stands of conifers of species from NW America.

The 2017 Sussex fieldwork found that many Firecrests were breeding in **western hemlock** and **douglas fir** plantations. **Spruce** (sitka and/or norway), **grand fir** and **western red cedar** stands also held birds. Even quite young plantations of douglas fir, with trees about 5m high, held breeding Firecrests. Smaller numbers were found in different habitats such as large ornamental gardens as well as smaller gardens with exotic conifers.

Firecrests can also occupy areas of deciduous trees, especially where there is **holly** and **ivy** and sometimes where there are a few conifers such as yew or any of the species mentioned above. Pure stands of pine or larch species, lacking the species mentioned above, do not appear to be used, although these trees are often present in suitable Firecrest habitat. Firecrest pairs can also be found in very thin strips of woodland, perhaps along roads, where there is holly and ivy, as well as in gardens and churchyards.



Ride separating a western hemlock plantation from a fringe of deciduous trees



Clearing in a plantation of western hemlocks with some western red cedars

For an excellent guide to the identification of NW American conifers see: <http://nwconifers.com/>

For the identification of norway spruce see for example: <http://www.first-nature.com/trees/picea-abies.php>

See also: Clements, R., Ward, M. and Wynn, R. 2017. Firecrests in Britain. *British Birds* 110:375-387

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Where Firecrests occupy plantations of conifers they are more likely to be heard singing and seen along rides or other more open areas within the plantation than in the interior. These more open areas will typically have a range of other trees and shrubs such as oak, birch, sweet chestnut, beech, sycamore, hazel, willow, rhododendron and holly. By contrast, the dark interior deep inside a mature fir or hemlock plantation, for example, is unlikely to be productive. The nature of the ground cover appears not to be a significant factor determining the presence of Firecrests.

Please search during the 2017-2018 winter for the following in Sussex:

- western hemlock plantations
- douglas fir plantations
- sitka spruce and norway spruce stands
- grand fir and western red cedar stands
- ornamental gardens with planted conifers
- smaller gardens with exotic conifers
- deciduous woods with holly or ivy or yew
- churchyards with exotic conifers or yew